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Claudia and David





BOOKS BY ROSE FRANKEN

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CLAUDIA · A PLAY

NOVELS :

PATTERN

TWICE BORN

OF GREAT RICHES

CLAUDIA

CLAUDIA AND DAVID

ANOTHER CLAUDIA

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CLAUDIA AND DAVID

BY

ROSE FRANKEN



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LONDON

One

THE HOUSE SEEMED TO BE SAYING GOOD-BYE TO THEM AS they drove away, down the road. David knew how she felt. "Do you want to go back?" he asked her.

She said, quite jauntily, "Not for worlds." But she didn't mean it. It was all she could do to keep from crying. The way the dogs acted had brought a lump to her throat. They'd known something was in the air, and had eyed the suitcase with distrust. The cat had seemed to feel something, too. He'd run around the house twice as if on important business, and then had scurried up a tree. "Bobby didn't mind so much, though," Claudia mused aloud, and of course it didn't mean anything at all to the baby.

Mrs. Cootz was standing at her gate as they passed, looking like all farmers' wives rolled into one. She waved, and Claudia waved back, feeling sorry for going off on a vacation when Mrs. Cootz had to stay at home and keep on working. And then Claudia saw little Joey run to his mother's side, and she felt only envy for Mrs. Cootz, because nothing was going to change in her life.

At the station David shook Fritz's hand. "Look out for the young pigs," he said. "And better keep the brooder going in the chicken house for another week or so."

"Fritz, never mind the pigs and chickens, watch out for the children," Claudia begged.

"I'll take care of everything," Fritz promised. He looked capable and strong and homely. Claudia remembered making teeth out of orange peel when she was a little girl, and sticking them in her mouth. Fritz looked like that when he smiled.

"I love Fritz," Claudia said, when they were on the train. David said that he did, too. They agreed, for heaven only knew how many times, that Fritz was perfect.

It was silly to have taken a drawing-room. "A drawing-room for a hundred miles," she scoffed, but liked it.

"Why not?" demanded David. "This is our second honeymoon."

"Couldn't it be a little more illicit than a honeymoon?"

"Go as far as you like," he said.

The drawing-room made Claudia hungry. She had only to look at a train, and she wanted a sandwich. She still had a choked-up feeling from saying good-bye to Bertha and the children, and from the missing of her mother's figure in the doorway—but just the same she couldn't get her mind off a sandwich.

"Go on," said David, "ring for the porter."

"If you insist," she murmured.

The porter was very black, and gave the impression of having come a long way. But he had only come from Boston. The train had only started at Boston. Claudia was affronted. "And then it turns around at New York and just goes back?" It spoiled things a little. And the sandwich was disappointing, as it was made with neither lettuce nor mustard, and the butter was almost invisible. "What kind of meals are on the plane?" she wondered.

"Everything tastes of cardboard," David told her brutally. But she smiled. "I shall like that," she said.

David frowned. "You're not illicit," he sulked. "You're just a glutton."

The plane trip was nothing. Once you were up in the air you might as well have been on the ground. Claudia had to remind herself that she was flying. She wrote postals to Bobby and Bertha and Fritz, and in a burst of whimsey sent additional ones to the baby and Shakespeare and the dogs. She gloated over the small packages of chewing gum that you got for nothing. When the supper was served, she thought it was darling. "But I could do without the fruit salad," she admitted. "Would you like my coffee, David?"

"There's a little thing beside you if you need it," he mentioned.

"Don't be silly," she said, coldly. She felt as if she had flown all her life. After the first couple of landings, she didn't even bother to fasten the safety strap, but when David found out about it, he threatened to wring her neck.

The night was long. She asked the steward to tell her when they were over the Mississippi. "Why do you want to know?" David asked her curiously.

"I remember it from school," she told him sentimentally. It was strange to be flying over the Mississippi. It didn't seem real.

Hardly anything seemed real. "Supper in New York, and breakfast in Los Angeles." With a little cheating on both ends, it was practically true.

Los Angeles turned out to be a quite remarkable place. Claudia couldn't get over the vegetables—spinach a penny a bunch, and avocados two for a nickel. To say nothing of three-dozen grapefruit for a quarter, and, my Lord, the oranges—

"Such irony to have to go to a hotel," she murmured,

fascinated by the beautiful markets. "I'm sure I could keep house for the two of us for about five dollars a week."

They were invited out to the Ferrises on the first evening. Stanley Ferris was an architect, like David, and he lived with his wife in a nice big roomy house, off the lower residential section of Wilshire Boulevard.

"Where," Claudia asked, "does Los Angeles end, and Hollywood begin?"

Mr. Ferris said that it was hard to tell, because Hollywood was more a state of mind than anything else. And Mrs. Ferris, who was approaching middle age in a happy, leisurely sort of fashion, said she was sure she didn't know. "Would you believe," she queried with a note of pride, "that I've never set foot in one of their motion-picture studios?"

Claudia found it almost impossible to believe, but said that she supposed it was like New Yorkers not ever having been to the Statue of Liberty, and Londoners never visiting the Tower of London. It appeared, however, that Mrs. Ferris knew both of these points of interest intimately, and she seemed a little surprised that Claudia had never been to either one. Claudia forebode to mention that she had never been to England, which explained the omission of the Tower, but she did say with the same pride that had tinged Mrs. Ferris's admission that, although she'd always lived in New York up to the time they'd bought the farm wild horses couldn't drag her to the Statue. "Or to any Points of Interest," she was about to add, when Mrs. Ferris announced with enthusiasm, "Stanley and I hope to be coming East for a round of sight-seeing this winter." Claudia was ashamed to say it after that, so she just said, "Isn't that lovely," and thought gloomily that she and David would have to entertain them in return for tonight's dinner.

Before the evening was over, Mr. and Mrs. Ferris had

laid a great deal more groundwork for reciprocity than a single dinner. Mrs. Ferris not only placed herself and her car at Claudia's disposal but they invited the young Naughtons to a concert the following Friday evening, and Mr. Ferris, who had once been quite handsome, topped the invitation by saying, "We'll drop in at the Cocanut Grove later and watch the dancing."

"Oh, that will be lovely," Claudia murmured again, but as soon as they were alone, driving back to the hotel, she grumbled to David, "I didn't come three thousand miles to hear a concert, or watch other people dance. Let's send the Ferrises a dozen roses for tonight's dinner, and call it square."

David said he knew what she meant—which was one of the nice things about David, as he might very well have argued that Mr. Ferris was the salt of the earth. "The only thing I'm afraid of," he said, "is that you're not going to have a very good time, if we don't make contacts."

Make contacts. It meant calling up all the people whose telephone numbers Julia and Roger Killian had written down for them. "I'm Claudia Naughton, Julia's sister-in-law—" or—"This is David Naughton, Roger Killian's partner—" Claudia winced. "Don't let's. It sounds like recommendations from an employment agency."

David said he'd have only done it for her sake, and was she sure she wouldn't get homesick being by herself most of the day?

"That's silly," she said. She wouldn't have told him for anything that she was already so homesick that she could hardly see straight. Every child she looked at sharpened the pain in her breast. She was having a manicure in the hotel beauty salon the morning after the Ferris dinner, when

a Filipino chauffeur brought in a little girl exactly Bobby's size, and left her in one of the booths.

"What's that baby doing in here?" Claudia asked the manicurist.

The manicurist glanced up. "Permanent," she said in an offhand way, and lifted Claudia's wrist. "Soak, please."

Claudia soaked. "I have a little boy back East, just about that age," she offered, with her insides feeling mashed.

The manicurist's eyebrow pencil climbed up her forehead. "So what?" the gesture unmistakably implied. She swished the file over Claudia's nails. "Vermilion polish?"

"Oh, no—colourless."

The manicurist looked more than ever bored. She dried Claudia's fingers languidly, gazing off into space as she did so. She herself wore vermillion, hanging like bright drops of blood at the end of each long pale finger. She had a remarkable hair-do, also—fully a hundred tiny curls twisted up like corkscrews on top of her head. "Unscrew and comb when ready for use," Claudia made silent comment. The manicurist gave her an inferiority complex. She longed to be home in her simple little Connecticut farmhouse where children were children, and bathrooms were bathrooms. "Oh, dear," she thought, unhappily, "we've only been here for a day and a half, how can I stand it for three weeks?"

However, she wasn't going to spoil the whole trip by letting David see how she felt, so she pretended to be very gay as she started off to meet him for luncheon at the Brown Derby. Mrs. Ferris had said, "You must lunch at the Brown Derby at least once—I understand all the Movie Stars go there—"

David had specified one o'clock sharp, and had underscored the sharp, as he said Claudia was always late. But he was late himself, and Claudia had to stand in line waiting

for a table, which she hated. It was a funny thing that everybody in line looked as if they came from Iowa, but everybody that was already seated looked as if they came from Hollywood.

A girl came in with blue glasses, no hat, and a sloppy long coat over plaid slacks. Immediately, the head waiter rushed up to her and piloted her off to an empty table. A few minutes later, a pretty young man came in, wearing a pink sweater, and the head waiter whisked him off to the same table. A sight-seer standing next to Claudia hissed to her friend, "It's Betty Astwick and Jimmy Toole!"

At that moment David arrived. The sight-seer stared at him, and nudged her friend. She thought David was a movie actor, too. But then the whole thing was spoiled because David said hello to Claudia, and squeezed her hand and said how was she, and why in hell did they have to stand in line like this?

Claudia said, "No tables—" And David immediately got independent and said, "To hell with them, we'll eat somewhere else—"

The waiter must have had ears and eyes in the back of his head, because he instantly rushed over to them, waving his arms and crying, "Monsieur, right away! Monsieur I have a table right away!"

"We were first," expostulated the sight-seeing lady, but the head waiter didn't hear her, and, still waving his arms, led the way down the aisle to a table marked "Reserved." He whisked off the sign, and bowed them in.

"My hero," Claudia said to David.

"To hell with them," said David, for good measure, and gave her his most beautiful smile.

"I love you better than Jimmy Toole," she said.

David was pleased, but when Claudia pointed out the

pretty boy in the pink sweater, he dipped his spoon in a glass of water, and let her have it. He did it so swiftly and expertly, that nobody knew anything had happened, except her eye. They might have been home, instead of eating in the most famous restaurant in Hollywood.

The menu was huge and Claudia loved it, but in the end, after going through all the fish and meat, she decided on a chef's salad, and iced tea. She threw back her heavy coat. "For heaven's sake," she said, "what's the matter with the weather here?"

"California," said David briefly, who was also hot.

"I've got only winter things," she deplored. "David, have we a little extra cash?"

"No, why?"

"I'm sorry to break the news to you, but I do need clothes."

"That's different—go ahead," said David, generously.

"How much can we afford?"

"Oh, a couple of hundred."

"You're mad. Half of that is twice too much."

Thanks to Mrs. Ferris, she had learned that there was only one place to shop—though Mrs. Ferris said she always went elsewhere. But Mrs. Ferris' elsewhere turned out to be in the most downtown part of Los Angeles, so David dropped Claudia off beneath a very imposing porte-cochere not far from their hotel. "It's worth going in, if only to look around," Mrs. Ferris had said.

It seemed rather empty—probably because it was so large and the carpets were so thick that you didn't make any noise when you walked. Claudia liked to make a reasonable amount of noise when she walked around a store, and certainly if she had been able to do so, somebody might have paid a little attention to her.

After several futile attempts to get waited on, she accosted a distinguished-looking elderly saleslady with white hair, bobbed like a boy's, and big pearl earrings. "Where are the dresses, please?" Claudia asked.

The saleslady said, off the top of her lungs. "You mean gowns, Modom? I'll send the hostess to you—"

Claudia watched her drift off, with a feeling of helplessness. Her pumps felt full of feet, and she wished that she had one of the Giant Malted Milks, for which Hollywood seemed to be famous. The pictures of them were breathtaking—a glass as big as a flower vase, filled with four scoops of ice cream, all for a dime. "I'd like to know how they do it," she thought, and was about to leave the shop and head for the nearest soda fountain, when the hostess appeared. She was slight, and vivacious, like a kindergarten teacher, and smiled with many white teeth rushing to the front of her mouth. "Can I help you?" she cried, investing the "can" with a great deal of voltage.

Out of sheer waywardness, Claudia said, with her lip thrust out like Bobby's, "I'm looking for the dress department."

"Yes, indeedie!—Our gown salon is on the second floor; I'll have someone take you there."

"I can go by myself," said Claudia, but a little errand girl appeared from nowhere and the hostess said, "Show Modom to the gowns."

"Come this way," said the little girl, and Claudia followed.

At this point Claudia began to have a very strange feeling. It might have been the heat, or it might have been nerves. "I've been all through this experience," she thought. But as she had never set foot in Hollywood before, she knew of course that the feeling was ridiculous. Still, the little errand girl seemed familiar, and she, Claudia, reminded herself of

of somebody, but she couldn't imagine who. Then suddenly it came to her. She reminded herself of Alice, and the little errand girl was the rabbit, and Hollywood, without any stretch of whimsey, was getting curiouser and curiouser.

"I'll leave you here," said the little errand girl, in her small high voice, and trotted off down the corridor.

Claudia stood where she was, looking about a vast rotunda of suavest walnut. Occasionally, from behind a sliding panel, a gown, cellophane-swathed, emerged like a discarnate soul, to sweep across the floor toward a prospective buyer. It was comparatively simple to distinguish the customers from the saleswomen on account of the mink coats. She wondered if not wearing a mink coat made her invisible, for nobody paid any more attention to her up here than on the floor below. She was about to leave in a huff, when the minkiest of the coats turned around, and Claudia caught sight of a small dark face framed in the soft folds of a voluminous collar. Claudia frowned. She didn't know anybody in Hollywood, except the Ferrises, and yet she could have sworn she knew that face, with its enormous eyes and rich red lips. She knew the voice, too, throaty and tempestuous and full of ups and downs. Beritza! But, of course! Beritza had made two pictures in the past year, and everyone in New York had said, "Beritza's finished. She'll never get back to the Metropolitan, she'll never give a concert again." Even the newspapers had printed words to that effect. Now Claudia's warm heart overcame whatever shyness she might have felt. She walked over to Beritza and held out her hand, and said, "How-do-you-do, Madame Beritza. I'm Claudia Naughton."

Beritza drew back and stiffened.

"Julia's sister-in-law," Claudia hastened to explain. "You stopped by on your way to Boston one day with her

and fell in love with our farm, and almost bought it, don't you remember? And then, at the last minute, we decided we just couldn't let it go."

Now, indeed, Beritza remembered. Claudia felt herself clasped in a fragrant embrace. "But, darling, of course!" Beritza cried on a crescendo of delight. "My house in Connecticut, will I ever forget it? My dear, this is thrilling to see you, this is really thrilling—Tony!" she broke off imperiously.

A round-faced, portly little man moved into evidence.

"Tony, this is my dear friend, Claudia."

Tony had not good teeth, Claudia noticed at once, and the hand that he extended was utterly limp. "My dear," he said. And that was all he said.

Beritza stamped her small foot in its short-vamped slipper. "Tony!" she prodded him impatiently. "You remember my house in Connecticut, my lovely house, with the great trees, and the cows and the chickens and the sheep and the pigs—"

Tony nodded. "The farm," he summed up, wearily.

"Of course, the farm. And this is Claudia! Her husband is the architect who—Is he here with you?" she interrupted herself to ask.

"Oh, yes," said Claudia. "The architect's convention."

"See, I told you!" Beritza was triumphant, as if the convention proved the validity of David's profession. "And you must both come to my party tonight. Mustn't they, Tony?"

"They certainly must," said Tony—which was a very bad sentence for anybody even without a lisp.

"But, oh, my dear," Beritza swept on, "wait till you see the dreadful way I live out here. I give you my word I have no room for anything but a canary bird—" She

sighed deeply. "Fancy, Tony, my giving up thousands and thousands of acres—"

"Only a hundred and ten," Claudia corrected, a little confused at so glorified a version of their simple salt-box house with its old barns and rolling meadows.

"I have to go!" cried Beritza, changing the subject. "I'm frightfully late! Are you coming, Claudia, I'll drop you?"

"No, I want to buy a dress," said Claudia; she was certainly going to need something to wear to Beritza's party.

"A dress!" Beritza clapped her hands. "Hogate will take care of you. I couldn't live without Hogate, she's marvellous! Where is Hogey, somebody get Hogey!"

"Miss Hogate!" "Miss Hogate!" "Miss Hogate!" Three little errand girls raised their voices like a hospital call board, and scurried off in different directions.

After a moment or so, Miss Hogate appeared, dashing across the floor as if she were coming toward them on skates.

"Hogey!" Beritza adjured her. "Take good care of Mrs. Naughton, who is my good friend! And be sure to show her the pink net—"

Miss Hogate had no bosoms, a thin, sallow face, and a determined character. She eyed Claudia up and down, and said with finality, "The pink net won't do at all."

Tony yawned. "Of course it won't," he agreed.

"You loved the dress," Beritza accused him indignantly. "Hogey, get it!"

But Hogey didn't have to get it. It was already there, as if by magic, held aloft by one of the little errand girls. Hogey took it from her. She held it out to Claudia.

"Seven ninety-five," she announced briefly.

Claudia could scarcely believe her ears. Seven ninety-five! Ordinarily she wouldn't have looked twice at the dress, because she didn't like pink and she didn't like net.

But seven ninety-five! True, she'd bought little summer dresses at three ninety-five in New York, and there was a certain shop on Twenty-third street where even Julia occasionally picked up a costume just for the lark of it. "How do you like my newest Paris creation?" she would ask with an absolutely serious face, and actually, Claudia could never tell the difference. "I had the hems gone over by hand," Julia would then confide, "and I changed the belt."

All this went through Claudia's head as she stared at the pink net dress. Mechanically, she reached for the hem. But there wasn't any hem—it was just net, three layers of net. She looked for the cheap telltale finishing of the short puffed sleeves, but they were protected by a concealing fold of muslin. "There's practically no workmanship on the thing," she summed up with an experienced glance. "Nor much material either." Still, she wondered how they could possibly make any profit, selling a dress at seven ninety-five in a shop with such thick carpets and beautiful paneling. But nothing surprised her about Hollywood at this point. The outdoor markets looked like sumptuous bazaars and yet they could afford to sell spinach at a penny a bunch, and give you four blobs of ice-cream in a ten-cent malted milk.

Tentatively, she touched the single ornament on the gown, a purple flower, embellished with trailing velvet streamers. Pink and purple. It was a pretty terrible combination. Misgiving assailed her. David wouldn't like it. Gaudy clothes weren't her type, and there was no sense in buying something simply because it was good value. She let the net fall from her fingers. "It's a frightful bargain," she sighed, "and I hate to pass it up, but I don't like the colour or the material."

She was immediately aware that her words had an electrifying effect upon the group. A passing saleswoman

stopped dead in her tracks. Claudia felt uncomfortable. Had she said something she shouldn't have said? Why was Tony looking at her with his jaw gaping? "What I mean is," she amended apologetically, "I think it's foolish to buy something simply because it's cheap."

Tony was the first to speak. He closed his mouth, and suggested hoarsely, "Why don't you try it on, anyway?"

"But you said it wouldn't do for me," she reminded him, reproachfully.

"I didn't mean it," he said in a voice like a croak. "I didn't know—"

Beritza patted his shoulder. "All right, Tony. The next time when Beritza introduces you to somebody, you can rest assured it's all right—Darling!" She turned to Claudia, "I must absolutely dash, I'm late for my hairdresser. And you're perfectly right, if you don't like this dress, Hogey will show you something else— See you this evening!—Hogey, give Mrs. Naughton my address—Come along, Tony!"

"Until tonight," Tony breathed, and lifted Claudia's fingers to his lips.

"My goodness," thought Claudia, staring after him in bewilderment, "he was positively reverent."

Reverent. That was the word. Miss Hogate, and all the little errand girls, and even the saleswoman who had stopped dead in her tracks, and hadn't yet started to move on, looked reverent.

Suddenly Miss Hogate came to life again. "See if a south dressing room is empty!" she commanded. "And call downstairs!"

In less time than it takes to tell, Claudia found herself in a sunny, mirror-lined room surrounded by a bevy of Claudias in faded panties, and a runner. "Oh, dear," she said

ruefully, and quite dishonestly, "Look at my stocking, it must have just happened!"

Miss Hogate tossed it off with a laugh. "Honestly, isn't it the limit?" she commiserated. "The more you pay for stockings, the worse they wear. That's beautiful underwear," she added with an envious sigh.

"Who, mine?" asked Claudia, surprised.

"I love the French handmade stuff," Miss Hogate continued, slipping the pink net dress off the hanger. "I bet those came right from Paris."

Claudia looked down at herself. Julia, who had always spent a fortune on undergarments, had simplified life after her operation, and had stopped wearing panties for some reason or other, so Claudia had inherited a whole stack of them. "They probably did," she agreed vaguely.

"It's too bad Mr. Anton isn't here." Miss Hogate held the dress in readiness for Claudia to duck into. "He'd adore this on you."

"Who's Mr. Anton?" Claudia demanded from a smother of pink net.

"Why, Tony Anton—he was just here with Madame Beritza. One second, Mrs. Naughton, the hook's caught in your hair—I thought you knew him—"

"Ouch!—I never saw him before. What does he do?"

Miss Hogate seemed baffled. "Well, he's—he's just about one of the most important people in Hollywood. There now, it's free. Lift your arms—so—"

"But what does he do?" Claudia persisted, emerging for air. "Write, act, play the violin?"

"Oh, he doesn't *do* anything," Miss Hogate explained. "He just goes with people."

"Oh," said Claudia.

"My dear!" exclaimed Miss Hogate, forgetting all about

Mr. Anton. "This is too beautiful for words!" She stood back, clasping her hands. "Perfect, not a bit of alteration! It's stunning! I *love* it!"

Claudia regarded her reflection. Yes, the dress was amazingly becoming, in spite of the atrocious colour combination. She looked thin as a rail, but at the same time, she had little round places just where she should have had them. "It is rather nice," she admitted, grudgingly. "I think I'll take it."

At once the room became full of people. The boyish old lady with the pearl earrings suddenly appeared from downstairs, carrying a mass of tiny hats. The saleswoman who had stopped dead, produced a brace of satin girdles. A young man burst in with a tower of toppling shoe boxes. Miss Hogate skated out and then skated right back in again, carrying a short fur wrap, which she arranged across Claudia's shoulders. It looked like rabbit skin. "I don't like it at all with the pink." Claudia stated firmly. "One cheapens the other." Besides, she had a very nice lamé cape of Julia's with her, and also some good brocaded evening sandals which she had never worn because she had bought them at a sale, and they pinched. "They can just go ahead and pinch," she assured herself, grimly, and waved the shoe boxes away. "No slippers, but I need stockings," she announced.

It was as if she had waved a wand. "*Stockings! Some body go downstairs and bring up stockings! Mrs. Naughton wants stockings!*"

Claudia raised her hand. "No, don't bother, please—I'll stop at the stocking counter and get them myself." She glanced at her watch. "I'll take the dress with me—"

A little sound of horrified protest flooded the air. Miss

Hogate stepped forward. "Oh, no, Mrs. Naughton, don't think of it, we'll send it!"

"It's so late, though. Can I depend on a delivery to-night?"

"Of course. You're at the Embassy, aren't you?"

Claudia nodded, wondering how she'd guessed. David had insisted on stopping at the best hotel, and besides he got a professional discount, on account of the convention.

As Miss Hogate buttoned up Claudia's last year's brown jersey, the boyish old lady approached stealthily from behind, and dropped a fluff of chiffon over Claudia's right eye. Claudia laughed outright. She looked as silly as anything. "Heavens, take it off!" she cried.

"Madame doesn't like evening hats," the boyish old lady interpreted regretfully.

"Madame certainly doesn't," Claudia assured her.

She stopped at the stocking counter on the way out. She didn't stop long. "Two fifty a pair, what a nerve!" she muttered, as she marched from the store.

It was already dark, and the boulevard looked like Coney Island with all its signs and posters. She gazed entranced upon a whirling windmill that was nothing more than a baker's shop, lit up. A flower vendor approached and offered sweet peas at five cents a bunch, and violets at ten.

"A bunch of each," said Claudia, feeling like a millionaire.

"Scented or unscented?" asked the vendor.

"Why—scented, of course," she replied, intrigued.

She had to wait while the vendor sprayed the blooms with perfume. She accepted them in a daze. "I'm dreaming," she thought. Suddenly she shivered. It was cold. The wind crept bleakly through her bones. What had happened to summer? She drew her winter coat about her. "Hollywood's crazy," she decided, in a kind of panic, and

quickened her steps toward the comparative sanity of her hotel bedroom.

David was there before her, running the water for a bath. He kissed her, and out of a clear sky he said, "Look, Claudia. Tell me the truth. Are you homesick, or are you having a good time here?"

David was uncanny. He was always like that, knowing things without her telling him. She was decisively, "I'm having a beautiful time, and I haven't thought of the baby or Bobby all afternoon."

"Oh," he said.

She remembered afterwards that he'd acted a little strange, but at the moment she didn't think anything about it. "I made a contact," she continued portentously. "And tonight, we go to our first Hollywood party!"

"You smell to high heaven," he informed her bluntly. "Whose party?"

"I do not. I never smell!"

"Not that kind of a smell," he qualified more kindly.

"Oh," said Claudia. "The violets!" She put them in water and then banished them outside the window, telling him about Beritza as she did so.

"That jackass?" David expostulated.

"Darling, please. We have to be nice to her."

"Why?"

"Firstly, she's a friend of Julia's. Secondly, she wanted to buy our house. Thirdly, she implied that she was practically down and out, and I'm not going to high-hat her. And last, but not least, I bought a dress, and I want to wear it—you'll die when you hear how much."

"How much?"

"Seven ninety-five. I told you before, you can live for nothing out here."

"You sound like you're in love with the place." There was a gloomy note in his voice, but like a fool she didn't notice it. She gave him back his words. "This is our second honeymoon," she said.

The dress arrived as he got out of the bathtub. He stood in the doorway, with a turkish towel around his loins, while she lifted it out from its folds of tissue paper. His nose went up.

"You don't like it."

"Why pink? Why purple?"

"Why not?"

"It's a little cheap-looking."

"I shouldn't have told you what it cost. You're prejudiced by New York prices. But Tony's a native, and he thinks it's stunning."

"Tony who?"

"Tony Anton. His teeth aren't good, but he's very nice."

"How'd he happen to see you in it? What's his business?"

"He didn't see me in it, he was just there. With Beritza. That's what he does. He goes with people."

"I don't like him," said David firmly. "And I don't like the dress, either."

He held it against his hairy chest, and his bare feet stuck out from beneath the trailing net folds. "It looks like hell," he maintained stubbornly. "Yip off the flower, and it mightn't be so bad."

"Believe it or not, the flower's nice when the dress is on me," said Claudia. "And besides, it matches the purple in my brocade slippers—Look."

David conceded that he liked the slippers, and when she was dressed, he conceded also, in reluctant admiration, that

she looked like a million dollars. "It's better on than off," he said.

"With a good figure," Claudia modestly pointed out, "you can wear any old rag and get away with it."

"That's so," said David. He dropped his hat and coat and put his arms around her. "For two cents, he said, huskily, "I'd stay right here, and let the party go to blazes."

"Me, too," said Claudia. "But let's don't."

The cab sped up the boulevard through Beverly Hills and then onward toward the sea. It swung into a parkway, and then it swung into a smaller parkway, with gravel splattering up against the wheels. It stopped.

Claudia peered out of the window. "This must be a mistake," she said to David. "This is a mansion of some kind."

"This ain't no mistake, lady," the driver announced with authority. "This is the address you give me."

"Oh," Claudia said faintly.

They walked up marble steps. A butler opened the door as they rang the bell. Then a maid in a grey satin uniform whisked Claudia away into a room padded with white velvet. The maid withdrew Claudia's cape and hung it on a rack. In a daze Claudia walked out into the hall, where David was waiting for her. "I thought you said she was down and out," he greeted her bitterly.

Before he had a chance to say anything else, Tony skipped up to them, crying, "Oh, there you are!" and pulled her into a tremendous room, seething with faces—unreal faces off a screen, with no dimension. "Wait for David," she begged.

"I don't know any David," he said. He dragged her from one to another. "The lovely Mrs. Naughton, wife o

the famous architect, the architect who did Beritza's home in the East, you know—thousands of acres. . . .”

“How do you do—How do you do—How do you do—”

Now everybody was introducing her, and somebody introduced her to David.

“No,” said David, “we haven’t met—” He grabbed her by the shoulder, and pushed her out into the hall again “Let’s get out of this,” he panted. “It’s a lunatic asylum and that dame thinks she owns our house!”

“Yes, I know, but it doesn’t matter.” Claudia quieted him. “Just let her think so—” She broke off to stare at him. He had a dab of lipstick across his face. “Where’d you get that!” she demanded.

A vision in white flew out at him. “Darling! I’ve been looking everywhere for you!” She hauled him away by main force, which was the last that Claudia saw of him.

Tony crept up, and put his arm around her. A light flashed. “Thank you!” The photographer moved away Tony laughed gleefully. “Come outside for a drink,” he urged.

He led her into a glass-walled enclosure with a lily pond and hundreds of yellow canaries in blue wicker cages. Claudia set her lips grimly. “Poor Beritza. No room for anything but a canary bird.”

She kept looking around for David. After a time, she forgot about him; everything became a blur. As soon as she put a drink down, she found another one in her hand. She wanted water, but no one would give it to her. Somebody kissed her. She wanted to slap his face but he wasn’t very steady on his feet, and she was afraid that she might knock him over. Beritza rushed over to her. She cried, “My lamb!” and called her “Eleanor.” “This is my friend, Eleanor, Mr. Belchnick!”

"Don't mind Beritza," Tony counselled. "She never remembers . . ." He hiccupped. Claudia hadn't known that people really hiccupped outside of books. "What time is it?" she implored.

"Half past ten," said a melancholy voice.

It wasn't Tony's voice. Tony was gone. Mr. Belchnick stood in his place. He had black curly hair, without charm, and a mole on his face. He looked at Claudia, and blinked very fast. Then he wiggled his nose. He was well over forty—much too old to have bad habits, Claudia thought.

"I asked Beritza to meet you," he said. (He asked Beritza to meet me?) Claudia smiled politely. He blinked once more, very gravely, and twisted his whole nose around his face in lieu of a wiggle. "Yes," he repeated, in a voice heavy with a one-time accent. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh," said Claudia, enlightened.

"I was talking to your husband, but he got away from me," he went on.

"You mean he was dragged away from you."

He ignored the distinction. "I hear he did a good job of Beritza's house in the East."

"He didn't build Beritza's house in the East," Claudia tersely contradicted.

Belchnick's face fell. "Tony said he did. Tony said he's a great architect."

"He is a great architect. He's the greatest architect that ever lived."

"All right then. That's all I want. Tell him he should come to see me at the studio tomorrow morning." He blinked twice more in rapid succession.

Claudia blinked. "But what on earth do you want to see him about? He doesn't like to build ordinary houses, I can tell you that."

"I don't want a house. I've got a house. I've got three houses. I want him for my new picture, 'Up With the Sun.' "

"Who are you?" Claudia asked.

"I'm Belchnick," repeated the man with considerable dignity. He took a box of pills out of his pocket, selected two of them, and thrust them down his throat. "High blood pressure," he explained modestly. "Listen, young lady, you get your husband to my office and you won't be sorry. He won't be sorry either. That's what we need in the movie business. Great architects to design great sets."

Claudia held dizzily to a chair. She didn't know what it was all about, but she thought it was wonderful. David was a genius—she was sure of it—but no one had ever made a fuss over him in New York. "I'll see what I can do," she promised unsteadily. "I'll go and find him right away."

"Thanks," said Mr. Belchnick.

Her knees felt weak with excitement. Tony waylaid her halfway across the room. "Why aren't you dancing?"

"I'll take care of that," said a smooth voice, and Claudia found herself clasped against the stiff shirt of the screen's greatest lover. She tried to pull away, because she had to find David, but he laughed, and held on to her, and there was a sharp scream of tearing material as his foot caught in the delicate net of her skirt.

"Oh, sorry. How awkward of me—"

Tony gasped. "My God," he cried out tragically. He lifted the net, dragging on the floor like the broken plumage of some lovely bird, and said again, this time in a stricken whisper, "My God—"

Claudia didn't feel any too pleased to see seven ninety-five go out of the window so to speak, but after all, it was an

accident. She examined the damage. "It can be mended," she dismissed it lightly. She felt sorry for the screen's greatest lover, who looked very crestfallen, and she felt that Tony was taking on about it because it was his nature to make tragedies of trifles. She gathered up the flounces, and smiled. "Don't think any more of it, please. I'll have it tacked, and it will hardly show."

A soft ripple of comment followed her across the floor. She reached the dressing room. The maid greeted her with a little moan. "Oh, Madame—what a pity—such a lovely gown."

She opened a white velvet-tufted mushroom standing on mirrored legs, and lo, it was a sewing box, so complete as to make Claudia suspect that ripped gowns were rather usual occurrences at a Hollywood party. The maid chose a perfectly matching spool of silk, and threaded a needle. While she was kneeling at Claudia's side, repairing the damage, Betty Astwick came in to powder her nose. She looked quite different without her dark glasses, but she wasn't anywhere near as beautiful as she was supposed to be, for her hair was quite stringy and she almost had a pimple. "I'm mad about that handsome husband of yours—and that's tough luck about your dress," she said in one breath. "Believe me . . ." She paused, mouth like a fish, replenishing her lipstick. "Believe me, I wouldn't be so good-natured if that had happened to a dress I'd just paid eight hundred dollars for."

Claudia smiled. She was about to retort. "Well, the moral of that is, never pay more than seven ninety-five for a dress," when something vaguely coincidental in the two amounts gave her pause for thought. "What did you say?" she asked.

Betty laughed. "Of course, Tony loves to blab prices,

but it's no secret what you paid for it because every last one of us wanted to buy the damn thing when it came in, it's so damned chic, only, my God, times are too hard to plunk out more than five hundred for a dress you only wear half a dozen times a season—"

When the room stopped swimming, Miss Astwick was gone, and the maid was saying, "You'd better sit down, Miss, you look sort of sick all at once."

"I am sick," Claudia gasped. There was thunder in her ears, and a dull swollen pounding of her veins against her temples. The maid pushed a chair beneath her, and thrust a cut-glass bottle under her nose. Claudia didn't know what it was, so she gulped at it. It almost killed her, but it cleared her head, and miraculously, stiffened the bones in her legs, so that she could stand up and totter toward the door. "I want to go home," she said hoarsely. "Please call a taxi. . . ."

The maid didn't seem in the least surprised or alarmed. "Madame Beritza's chauffeur will take you," she said. She put a competent arm around Claudia's waist. "Lean on me," she said, "and I'll lead you out through the terrace. There's plenty can't drink," she added consolingly.

Claudia made no attempt to disillusion her.

"My husband—Mr. Naughton—" she couldn't seem to find enough breath to form a sentence. "Get word to him—"

"I'll attend to everything very quietly, Miss," the maid assured her. "And Boyce will see that you get home safe."

Boyce was competent too. He escorted her through the hotel lobby, and into the elevator. "Sure you're all right now, Miss?"

"I'll never be all right again," Claudia thanked him in a

shaky voice, "but I'll manage to get upstairs if that's what you mean."

"Some black coffee," he advised her in a friendly undertone.

She had forgotten to ask for the key, but luckily the door to the room was open. She burst in. David was sitting at the telephone. "Never mind it, Operator, I'll put the call through later," he said hastily. He hung up the receiver, and turned to her. "You didn't have to follow me, I came home to phone Roger. I was going back for you—What's the matter, you're white as a sheet?"

She dug her nails into her palms. There was nothing to be gained by beating about the bush. "David," she said, "if you want to divorce me, I deserve it. You can even have the children. I'm not fit to take care of them. I'm not fit to be let loose without a keeper. . . ."

David rose, and advanced slowly in her direction, until his hands reached out and encircled her arms like bands of iron. She could feel her control slip away.

"Oh, dear, I don't know how to break it to you," she wailed. "I'd kill myself if it would help, at least you wouldn't have any more expense with me than the funeral. I wouldn't even want a funeral, just a plain pine box and no flowers—"

"Stop babbling. What's happened!"

She wrung her hands. "If you're yelling before you even know about it, you'll simply burst a blood vessel when I tell you!"

"Claudia, you can tell me anything, I promise to understand—"

"Very well. Here goes." Her voice sounded high and toneless, like somebody else's voice. "Could you under-

stand anyone paying eight hundred dollars for something very pink and very purple?"

"What do you mean?"

She tried again. "David, look at me," she besought him desperately. "I'm wearing a new barn, I'm wearing a year of the best kindergarten with hot lunches for Bobby, I'm wearing all the pure-bred pigs and sheep you're so crazy to get, with maybe a horse thrown in—"

"Well," said David, "it's all very becoming, I must say. Especially the hot lunches."

"Oh, David, you're making it so hard for me! Listen. In plain language, I misunderstood the salesgirl. This dress didn't cost seven ninety-five, it cost seven hundred and ninety-five! Now do you get the point?"

For a long moment, in which she could feel every hair on her head turn grey, she saw significance percolate into his brain like coffee, slow to come to a boil. He didn't say anything, he just stood there looking at her. And then all at once he began to laugh, and he laughed until the tears poured down his cheeks. He laughed until he had to hold his stomach, and when he tried to talk, his voice went up in his head in squeaks.

"Hollywood high-hatted by an expert!" he managed to bring out at last. "It's marvellous!"

"You sound like Tony," she adjured him, coldly. "And if it contributes to your merriment, I might as well tell you that somebody put his foot through the hem and I can't even send it back—"

"I don't want to send it back," David gasped. "I want to keep it as a memento!" He got a stitch in his side, and in agony, tottered to a chair, where he just sat, making horrid sounds as if he were going to die. She regarded him with sudden apprehension, wondering if people ever

really did die laughing. Her instinct told her to jerk him out of it. But he was too old to slap his hands, and she hesitated to slap his face, feeling that under the particular circumstances, it might add injury to insult. Therefore, not knowing what else to do, she summoned her most casual manner, and started to tell him about Mr. Belchnick. Unfortunately, the mention of Mr. Belchnick started him all over again. He fell off the chair and looked up at her with his head practically rolling on the floor. "That's not a name," he moaned; "that's something to apologise for. . . ."

"Nevertheless, he wants to see you at his office in the morning. I think he wants to offer you a job."

David climbed back on the chair, and wiped away his tears. "He offered it to me already," he said, weak with exhaustion. "Fifteen thousand dollars to design the sets for his new picture."

"Fifteen thousand dollars!" Claudia's voice went off into a bleat. "Why, that's a fortune! He must be crazy, he's never even seen any of your work!"

"He doesn't have to," said David. "If an architect can afford to dress his wife in eight-hundred-dollar clothes, 'Why, that's the man for me,' says Mr. Belchnick—"

"But you *can't* afford it!"

"That's where you're wrong. I can't afford not to, from this point on."

Claudia's eyes almost popped out of her head. "You mean I have to go on dressing in expensive clothes?"

"Too late to stop now."

"That means a mink coat—"

"Two of them. One long, one short."

Her thoughts swam in a vast confusion: "Pinch me," she implored him.

He pinched her.

She jumped and said, "Ouch!"

"That's for buying the damn dress to begin with," he scowled at her.

Her anger soared. "You're a snake in the grass!" she accused him, hotly. "First you pretend it's funny, and you're not going to even scold me, and then you pinch me! I don't know where I'm at with you!"

"I don't know where I'm at with you either!" He was shouting now, in a most unpleasant way. There was no rhyme or reason to it. She couldn't imagine how they'd gotten into such a state. Then the telephone bell rang, exactly like a cue in a play.

"I'll take it," said Claudia, mechanically.

It was Stanley Ferris. He said, "Hello, Mrs. Naughton, I hope I didn't wake you."

"Oh, no," she assured him in a voice dripping syrup for David's benefit. "I was far from asleep."

"Good." Mr. Ferris sounded normal, and kindly. "How about dropping in at the Cocoanut Grove to watch the dancing?"

"What's he want?" asked David.

Claudia mouthed it to him. He nodded violently. "By all means. I've got to talk to him," he said.

It was the last thing she expected. David knew perfectly well how she felt about Mrs. Ferris, and besides she would have liked to go to bed. But evidently he had forgotten that there was such a place as bed. She turned back to the telephone, crucified. "We'd adore to go," she said.

"That's fine," said Mr. Ferris, who didn't recognize irony when he heard it. "As long as you're flying back tomorrow evening, you might as well see something of the place. We'll pick you up in fifteen minutes."

Slowly, Claudia hung up the receiver. Flying back tomorrow when they'd planned to stay a month? When they'd just been planning to stay for ever? Her heart stood still. There was something wrong. Of course there was something wrong—David leaving the party to telephone—David acting strangely before they'd even gone to the party—And now Mr. Ferris saying that they were leaving tomorrow. She forgot the dress, she forgot everything except the fear that clutched her throat.

"David, the children!"

"The children are fine; what are you talking about?"

Her lips moved stiffly. "I don't believe it. Something's happened at home and you haven't told me!"

"Did I ever lie to you?"

"Yes, because Mr. Ferris just said we were flying back tomorrow. Why should we fly back tomorrow if everything's all right?"

He looked sheepish, and dug into his pocket, withdrawing a telegram. "Here. Stop getting excited over nothing."

The message shook in her hands, the words danced, then steadied. "PLANS FOR RADIO BUILDING ACCEPTED. WOULD URGE RETURN IMMEDIATELY AFTER CONVENTION. CONGRATULATIONS. ROGER."

"Over nothing!" she echoed. "Have you lost your mind, 'Over nothing'?—When did this come?"

"This afternoon."

"Why didn't you tell me!"

"I tried to, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Well, this is our first vacation together and you were just beginning to enjoy yourself. How could I spoil it for you?"

"Spoil it for me—Oh, David, you fool! You fool!"

"You mean you want to go?" he demanded incredulously.

"Does a duck want to swim?"

"But what about Belchnick? What about the mink coat?"

"Must I have one?" she whimpered. "I've always liked tweed. Only what about the pink dress," she remembered in a panic. "How will we pay for it?"

"The pink dress was cheap at twice the price!" He was shouting again, and his grip on her wrists hurt a great deal more than the pinch, only it wasn't the sort of pain one minded, or the sort of yelling one minded. She knew exactly where she was at with him, and he seemed to know exactly where he was at with her, which was one of the wonderful things that happened every now and again, in marriage.

They were still in each other's arms when Mr. Ferris' car was announced.

"Let him wait," said David.

Mrs. Ferris seemed rather pleased that it had grown so late. "Stanley doesn't have to get down to the office until eleven tomorrow," she planned happily. "This is the very best time to see the night life of Hollywood. I understand it only begins after midnight.

To her great chagrin, however, the Coconut Grove was practically empty when they arrived. There wasn't a movie star in sight, and the few tables that were occupied, held the very same sort of people who had been standing on line at the Brown Derby. "Oh, it's just too bad, I'm so disappointed!" she deplored. "It would have been so nice for you to have gotten a peep at the real Hollywood. I can't understand why it's so quiet just when we want it to be gay!"

"Perhaps somebody's giving a big party," David suggested, with an affable smile, "and they've all been invited to it."

"I shouldn't be surprised if that's just exactly the case," Mrs. Ferris agreed at once. "I wonder what goes on at those Hollywood parties?"

"It's a different world," said Claudia, dreamily.

"A state of mind," Mr. Ferris neatly topped it. "I always say Hollywood is a state of mind."

"Yes," said Mrs. Ferris. "That's what Stanley always says." She patted Claudia's hand. "You're looking very pretty this evening, my dear, pink is so becoming to you, that's a very charming little frock!"

Claudia pulled herself back into the world that was, into the world that held David, and all that he stood for. And then she caught the dangerous, wicked twinkle in his eye. She gathered her courage in both hands. "Oh," she said, casually, "It's just a little rag I picked up for seven ninety-five."

Mrs. Ferris felt the net between her finger tips. "My dear," she said, "that's really dirt cheap. Such lovely quality, and quite a pretty flower." She broke a roll, and sighed. "You can find such wonderful bargains with a slim young figure."

Claudia smiled. Her hand reached back towards Mrs. Ferris' in a gesture of the warmest and purest affection. "You must promise to come and see us in the East," she said, and meant it from the bottom of her heart.

Two

LITTLE JOEY COOTZ SAW THEM COMING DOWN THE ROAD, AND was quite surprised for his age. But Bobby didn't bat an eyelash. He just said, "Hello!" and took the present that they had brought him as if they'd been away for weeks. Bertha, however, made up for his matter-of-factness. "Ach," she cried in rising crescendo, "I can't get over it! I think I'm seeing ghosts!"

"Of course we're ghosts," Claudia elaborated. "We were just killed in an aeroplane accident. Didn't you know?"

Although Bertha laughed it off, she wasn't too happy about it. "Such nonsense," she said, and quickly sought the refuge of Fritz' solid common sense.

"I like ghosts," said Fritz. "I believe in them." His teeth came popping out in a broad smile as he carried their suitcases upstairs.

"It won't pay us to unpack," said David. "We're going away again." Then they broke the news that they had to live in New York for the winter on account of David's plans for the radio building having been accepted. "I won't ever leave the children again," Claudia explained, "so it means taking them along."

"And us?" cried Bertha.

David shook his head. "There's nothing for it but to leave Fritz here to look after the farm, and you to look after Fritz," he said, regretfully.

"And who looks after my babies, I would like to know?" demanded Bertha, drawing her chin in. "No. Fritz can very nicely take care of himself, I go with you. That is settled."

It was more than they had hoped for. Never in their wildest dreams had they imagined that Bertha would consent to leave her husband. But it seemed that her married daughter, Lisa, was having trouble, and Bertha was happy to be near her.

"I wonder," Claudia said to David, "how long you have to be married before you put your children first?"

"The day you're married that long, you can start getting a divorce," said David.

They had a hard time finding an apartment that they liked. Claudia stuck up her nose at everything she saw. "Knick-knacks. If we could only find a place without knick-knacks and scatter rugs."

At last they found a place that was a little less objectionable than all the other places they had looked at. It was exactly what one would expect of a furnished apartment, but every cloud has a silver lining and this one happened to have a double bed in the master bedroom.

Claudia pretended that she did not even notice it, and David did the same. He approved the ceilings, however. "They're unusually high," he pointed out.

Claudia nodded, and approved the ventilation. "Two exposures in the nursery. We really ought to take it. It's the only place we've seen with two exposures in the nursery. And it's clean. All clean shelf paper in the kitchen."

"Then we certainly ought to take it," David agreed.

Still, neither of them mentioned the double bed.

"We were fools," David said merely, the morning after the day that they moved in.

"You were the architect," Claudia reproached him, bitterly.

"It wasn't a question of architecture; you said that twin beds were the only sanitary way to sleep."

"Don't be silly. That was modesty. After all, you were practically a stranger to me. The least you could have done was to argue with me, and I might have been persuaded."

"I never argue with ladies," David returned. "But of course," he amended, "I had no way of knowing that you weren't a lady."

"Were you disappointed when you found out I wasn't?"

"If there were more wives, and less ladies . . ." David answered obliquely.

"I know what you mean," said Claudia.

Starting off with those sentiments, there was every reason to believe that the winter in New York was going to be a wonderful experience, a complete reconditioning of their marriage, so to speak. But she soon found out that David had no intention of doing anything else but slave over his precious plans every night of the week.

"You wanted thirteen children," he reminded her.

"I've changed my mind. Three will do."

"Even three takes money."

"It takes a husband, too," said Claudia, succinctly.

The climax came when he telephoned home, one Tuesday afternoon, not to expect him for dinner.

"I don't expect you," she informed him, tersely. "Julia and Hartley expect you. It's their anniversary."

He'd forgotten all about it. But he wasn't in the least contrite, and said that a woman who had had the majority of her important organs removed was all front and no back, and the less celebrating she did, the better.

"You ought to thank me for not having to go," he had

the audacity to say. "You don't know enough about music and politics to keen awake at one of Julia's dinner parties."

"But I'd looked forward to this one," Claudia protested. "It's the first time I've had a chance to wear my pink dress, and I'd gotten a manicure and a facial especially to go with it."

"Oh, that's too bad," he said. "Why don't you go without me?"

"I hate going places without you. I get tongue-tied, and have three feet and five hands and don't know who to talk to and feel like a wallflower even if there isn't a wall."

She certainly thought that after a speech of that sort he'd say, "All right, darling, I'll take you." But no. He reiterated in a firm offhand way, "Sorry, dear, I can't make it."

She was so furious that she couldn't even talk.

"Sulking?" he queried blandly.

"Sulking? I'm wild. I'm a neglected wife and our marriage is going on the rocks, and how do you expect to hold me, if you keep putting business first?"

"And you also seem to forget that I'm young and full of life, and not bad to look at, and if you don't appreciate me somebody else will," he took up, glibly.

With all her thunder stolen, she was reduced to sheer inanity. "Oh, all right for you," she threatened futilely.

She hung up the receiver with a sigh. David said he needed to make money, which was true to an extent. But money wasn't the real issue, it was only an excuse. He wanted to work, and this new deep engrossment, this consuming desire for superior achievement, left her puzzled and a little at loose ends.

For the third time in four days she went into the kitchen to prepare herself a solitary egg upon a tray. There were

lamb chops in the icebox, but there was no pleasure in a lamb chop if you ate alone.

"What are you doing?" asked Bertha, who was stirring cereal. "You're going out, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't. Mr. David can't get away."

"Ach," mourned Bertha. "And so much I wanted to see you in your new dress." She brightened. "Why don't you go, anyway? Have a fine dinner and then come home," she suggested shamelessly. "An egg on a tray is nothing."

There was good horse sense in what Bertha said. Claudia was thoroughly bored with eggs, and Julia's dinners were always a triumph of culinary perfection, beginning with caviare and ending with a professional dessert. She glanced at herself in the small mirror that hung with true furnished convenience, above the kitchen sink, and took stock of her enamelled skin and orderly brows, plucked for the first time in her life, to a winged arch. "It's worse than having a baby!" she'd expostulated, and marvelled how women could endure such torture for the sake of vanity. "You get used to it," the operator had assured her, "you ought to have a facial every week." "Catch me," Claudia had silently returned.

It enraged her now to think of all the agony she'd gone through, to say nothing of five and a quarter in cash. "It's a crying shame to waste my face by staying home," she grumbled.

"Then you go," Bertha gently prodded. "Mr. David will like it. It will do you good."

"All right," Claudia agreed without enthusiasm. "I might as well."

It was rather a middle-aged affair—not one of Julia's usual gatherings of artists and musicians and Junior League and

Newport. There were only twelve guests, all old friends, and Julia's aunt from Boston, who wore a lorgnette, and said "How do you do' like "Howjdu." "Nothing very exciting," Claudia sized up the impending evening, "but at least nobody's going to sing after dinner."

Hartley caught sight of her, and hurried toward her. "Well, well, well," he said. "Look who's here." Hartley never said very original things, but he was always sincere. He put his arm around her, and gave her a kiss. "Where's that brother of mine?" he said.

"Working," Claudia told him.

Julia noticed the dress at once. You couldn't fool Julie when it came to clothes. "First decent gown you've had," she murmured. "You look very chic. But very." She seemed a little surprised about it. "No more surprised than I was," Claudia thought.

She was glad when supper was announced, and applied herself to the first course with concentration. It was a month with an R in it, so there were oysters instead of caviare. She glanced up at her dinner partner, and smiled, "Lovely oysters," she remarked happily. She noticed that his plate was untouched. "Don't you like them? I thought everybody liked oysters."

"I like them" he said.

"But they don't like me," she supplied. He looked about the age of indigestion—tall and rather lean, with distinguished streaks of grey in his hair, and hard, firm, sensitive lips. He reminded her of somebody—she couldn't think who. Then it came to her. He looked just the way that she had always imagined that David would look when he was forty.

She stole a peep at his place card. Mr. Philip Dexter. She remembered Julia speaking of the Dexters—Edith

Dexter was an old schoolmate and had just come back from a long rest cure for something or other. Claudia had a remarkable memory for details of that sort, and for telephone numbers, although she could never remember really important things like the Spanish-American War, or what Relativity was all about.

She regarded Philip Dexter with interest. David could be complimented at the resemblance, she decided, and she was relieved when he denied the indigestion charge.

"I can eat tacks," he said.

"Then why don't you?"

"I was having a nicer time looking at you."

He said it quietly, with a kind of awkward dignity. She felt herself grow warm with pleasure. "That's one of the nicest compliments that anyone ever gave me. To be more attractive than an oyster, is really something—"

"You seem fond of them," he remarked with a smile. "Wouldn't you like to have mine, too?"

"Oh, don't be silly. You eat them."

"But I don't want them."

"You can't just let them go to waste!"

"It does seem a pity."

Claudia sighed. "I'd love to have them," she admitted, "but Julia would have a fit."

"What Julia doesn't know won't hurt her," said Mr. Dexter, and performed the exchange with a single movement of his thin, strong hands. "Nice hands," Claudia inwardly commented, with a pleased sense that she was examining some future projection of David. She liked a faint hairyness across the knuckles and wrists. "David could stand a shade more," she decided, "for authority."

She began her second plate of oysters. "These six are

for you," she informed her husband mentally, "and a lot more than you deserve."

She couldn't help feeling a little self-conscious about the double portion, and looked around beneath her lashes. Everyone was busy talking and eating, but across the table, quite far down, she noticed a single pair of eyes intently fixed upon her. She knew, without knowing how she knew, that it must be Edith Dexter. She smiled, feeling cordial. But Mrs. Dexter (if it was really she) looked swiftly away, with a slight flush creeping up her cheeks.

"Is that your wife in the blue dress?"

"Yes."

Claudia wanted to say generously, "She's awfully pretty," or "What lovely hair," or, "She seems so charming," but in all honesty, the only thing she could think of was that Mrs. Dexter looked as if she took a hot-water bag to bed with her every night. "She's eternally chilly," thought Claudia, "and tired and afraid." She stole a glance at Mr. Dexter. He was staring straight ahead of him, unseeing, with the little bone at the top of his jaw moving tensely beneath the smooth leanness of his cheek. It was a habit of David's, too, when he was under strain, or trying to control his temper. Mr. Dexter wasn't angry—he seemed a very gentle person—but undeniably, he was under strain.

"What's the matter?" Claudia asked him softly.

He looked down at her. He didn't say, "Nothing's the matter," or "Why do you ask?" He didn't say anything. He just looked at her. Claudia felt her heart begin to hammer. She couldn't finish the last two oysters. Her hand felt unsteady as she put her fork down. She couldn't imagine what in earth was wrong with her.

David's key sounded in the latch a few minutes after she

had gotten in. He said, with a trace of surprise, "Oh, you went to Julia's? Did you have a nice time? Who brought you home?"

"A Mr. and Mrs. Dexter—. Yes, a very nice time. Are you dead? Would you like a glass of milk?"

"No thanks—. Yes, I might at that."

Her eyes narrowed. "I bet you twenty cents you didn't have any supper."

"I did," he said, and she could tell that he was lying.

"I'll make you a sandwich as soon as I get out of this." She backed up to him to be unfastened. "By the way, how do I look?"

"All right," he said, and nibbled at her neck.

She yanked up her shoulder, excruciated. "You don't even look at me and you say, 'all right.'"

"Well, you do." He ran his finger down her cheek. "Too much rouge, though."

"It isn't rouge." She slipped out of her dress, and hung it carefully away on a padded hanger. For the first time since their honeymoon, she was acutely conscious of her body. "Do I look like a woman who has had two children?"

"No, ma'am," said David, fitting boot trees into his shoes.

She pulled her stomach in, and thought of Mrs. Dexter. Mrs. Dexter was stringy, and yet there was fat where there shouldn't have been fat. A soft, sly padding of it lurked against her arm-pits, and above her abdomen—a torpid kind of flesh that came from illness and lack of energy to exercise. "I'm so full of energy I could bust," thought Claudia.

She flew to the kitchen to make a sandwich, and added fried eggs and bacon for good measure, and a strong, hot cup of coffee.

David was affronted and asked her what she thought he

was? But he fell to anyway, and gulped down every crumb of it.

"Look, darling," Claudia said, "Mr. Dexter asked us if we wanted to have lunch with him at some funny but marvellous fish place, down on Fulton Street on Thursday? Not us, but me, only I said you adored oysters, too."

"Who's Mr. Dexter?"

"I told you. He and his wife brought me home tonight."

"What sort?"

"She's not too exciting. But he's nice. Awfully. Very quiet. Julia says he's a brilliant lawyer. He won that big anti-trust case. What's an anti-trust case?"

David yawned. "You wouldn't understand."

"You're pretty certain of me, aren't you?"

"Pretty."

"They lost an only son two years ago. Sixteen. She's been a wreck ever since."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Dexter—. How about it?"

"How about what?"

"Oysters. Fulton Street."

He brought his mind back from a long distance. "Hell, no, darling. I'll probably be in Philadelphia on Thursday." He rose and started to carry his dishes to the kitchen.

"Don't. I'll do it. Do you mind if I go?"

"Where?"

"Oh, David, you're impossible. With Mr. Dexter."

"Of course not. Why should I?"

"I just wondered."

He ruffled her hair. "Sure you don't need help with the dishes?"

"Sure."

When she returned to the bedroom, he was rolling into bed.

"Did you wash your teeth?" she questioned him, sternly, as if he were Bobby.

"I think I did."

For fun, she felt his brush. It was stone-dry. She stalked back into the room, all for boxing his ears, and reminding him of expensive cavities lying in wait for just such negligence. She stood over him. He was sound asleep. Even when she bent to kiss him, he didn't stir.

She was glad she had a new tweed suit and a new hat, that tipped down over one eye like a pancake. She hadn't been able to find a hat that looked like a hat, and trying it on for David and for Bertha, she'd felt like a monkey. Wearing it, however, to go to lunch with Philip Dexter, she felt dashing, and well-groomed. It was the first time in all her marriage, it occurred to her, that she was lunching with another man.

He called for her in a long, low roadster. "Certain cars are becoming to certain people," she thought. The roadster was becoming to Philip Dexter. It was too bad David couldn't drive a roadster. No man looked his best in a family sedan.

It seemed less than no time before they were sitting at a long wooden table with thick bowls of steaming clam chowder before them. "Scallops are very nice to go on with, sir," suggested the waiter, who was very old, and very friendly.

"I love scallops," Claudia promptly agreed. "But I love shrimps, too," she added, wistfully.

"Shrimps are very nice," said the old waiter.

"That's no help," Claudia murmured.

"A portion of each and we'll divide," said Philip.

"If it's anything I love it's that."

"What?"

"Dividing in a restaurant. David never will. Mrs. Dexter must have trained you properly."

"I'm afraid not," said Philip, soberly. "Mrs. Dexter is a lady without appetite."

"That must be terrible," said Claudia. "I think having a good appetite is one of the greatest pleasures in life." ("And sitting opposite a bad appetite day after day must be awful," she added to herself.)

For all their talk of appetite, however, they barely touched the steaming chowder or the platters of luscious shrimps and scallops. Peter Dexter made no comment on her failing. He left a liberal tip for the saddened waiter, and together they emerged into the thin sunlight of the river's edge.

Claudia felt as if she ought to say something; after all he was a busy, important lawyer and he had taken time off in the middle of the day to give her a treat—as if she were a child. Perhaps he was disappointed, perhaps she had let him down. She glanced at him as he slipped into the driver's seat beside her. His profile, beneath the soft felt hat, was sharp-etched, and full of tempered strength, like steel. His gloved hand lay on the wheel, and the dark cloth of his coat touched her arm. She was acutely conscious of his nearness, and the consciousness disturbed her, and grew within her like a palpitant substance, that took the place of talk and laughter. When they had first started out, she had felt gay and talkative, telling him about the farm and how David called Fritz twice a week like a religion, to find out how everything was. "I always wanted that kind of a life," Philip Dexter had mentioned. "Horses, chiefly, and dogs—"

"Why didn't you have it?"

He'd shrugged. "Too busy. And by the time I got around to it, I dare say it was too late—it wouldn't mean very much to Edith now, without the boy."

"I suppose not," Claudia had agreed, but inwardly she'd thought, "I'd like to give that woman a good piece of my mind."

Now, on the way home, she began to think about Edith Dexter again. Her thoughts built an image of a tired, joyless woman, sterile with memory; and from that image grew an image of herself—strong and alive and keenly sentient of the kind, shy, gentle man beside her. She wondered if women did not always build images out of the weaknesses of each other. "It's a rotten thing to do," she told herself.

They were at Fifty-seventh street, and then they were standing before the door of her apartment house.

He held out his hand. She felt her fingers crushed briefly in his warm clasp. She wanted to cover the turbulence in her heart; she wanted to be casual, and poised. Instead, she stammered with all of her natural gaucheness and directness, "Remember me to Mrs. Dexter. And thanks for everything." She hurried from him, wanting to get upstairs as fast as she could, wanting to hear David's deep young voice coming to her over the telephone. "If he's busy, I'll say its important," she planned. "And when he says, 'What is it?' I'll say, 'I love you more than ever.'"

She let herself in with her latchkey. Bertha had taken Bobby and the baby to the park, and on the table in the hall she had left a note in her spidery handwriting which looked as though it was in German even though it was in English. Claudia put up the light to read it. "Mr. David called up. He had to go to Philadelphia overnight." She crumpled the note, sick with disappointment, and then a wave of anger

swept over her, "I'm tired of playing second fiddle to a building," she muttered aloud.

Julia telephoned a little later. Julia never wasted time in beating about the bush. She said, "Did you lunch with Philip Dexter today?"

Claudia was surprised. "Yes, why? How did you know?" she asked.

"Look here, my dear, I'm only your sister-in-law and I'll understand perfectly if you tell me to mind my own business."

"No, go on, please."

"It's Edith. She's just spoken to me—furious. You were this, that, and the other thing. I told her she was utterly mad, you're so much in love with your own husband you didn't know other men exist, and as for Phil—he's never looked at another woman. What did you do to him?"

"Not a thing," said Claudia, amazed.

"I believe it, but Edith's worked herself up into some crazy notion that you're after his scalp. After all, you did look pretty sophisticated in that pink frock the other night, and young, and chic, and all the things that Edith isn't, and Phil lost his head, I suppose."

"He hasn't lost his head," Claudia denied. "He just took me down to some funny little dump on Fulton Street because he knew I liked fish."

Amusement filled Julia's voice. "Is that where you went?"

"Yes, and David knew about it."

"Listen, Claudia darling," Julia patiently explained, "I'm not censuring you, or asking you for an accounting. Heaven knows I'm not the one to talk—" A note of complacency hinting of similar triumphs crept into her voice—"I'm only

saying that Edith's a little hysterical about it, because Phil isn't the sort of man who goes around having affairs."

"He certainly is not," said Claudia. "He's an absolute gentleman."

"I don't see the connection," Julia murmured. "But anyway, I'm devoted to both of them. Edith used to be a beautiful thing, though it's hard to believe now, and then Phil became very busy and successful, and she lost herself in the boy. When the boy died, something just stopped in her."

"Exactly. But does she expect something to stop in her husband, too? After all, if she'd had any appetite he'd have asked her to come along today."

"Appetite?" Julia repeated incredulously.

"She detests fish," Claudia stated flatly.

Julia laughed. "You're incredible. Listen to me, infant. Phil wouldn't have asked her along, even if she liked fish."

"I asked David along," Claudia virtuously maintained.

"Would you again?" Julia's tone was sly and knowing.

"No, I wouldn't," thought Claudia, in wonder. "I really wouldn't." Aloud she said, "Oh, don't be silly."

"At any rate," Julia changed the subject, "this isn't getting us anywhere. I simply thought it would be wise to let you know that Edith had accidentally found out about the luncheon—Phil's secretary said something that made her put two and two together, and then she called me, and I told her definitely, 'No!' Because, after all—well, darling, you're just not built for intrigue. You look like you were, you act like you were, you even talk like you were—but you're not."

Claudia boiled. Fortunately the bell rang at that moment, cutting off the indignation that rose in a sputter to

her lips. "Wait a minute," she said instead, "there's someone at the door and Bertha's out."

It was a delivery boy in a dark-blue uniform. "Naughton?" he crisply queried, and handed over a long white box. "Sign here."

Claudia signed, with her pulses racing happily in her throat. Flowers. Long ones, with the stems sticking through the end of the box. It was darling of David who, not having reached her on the telephone, was sending her this loverlike token of esteem. He'd probably written some absurd note to that effect. She glanced apologetically at the dangling receiver, and tore off the flat red ribbon. White roses. Gorgeous masses of them, breathing gently beneath folds of soft waxed paper. "You extravagant idiot!" she exclaimed, burying her face in them. She lifted the card that peeped from beneath the fresh fern. "*Philip Dexter*." And below the engraving, in forceful black handwriting, "Thank you for a happy hour out of your rich, full life."

She laid her cheek against the blooms, and put the box on the table. "They smell like a funeral," she thought. She wondered whose funeral—David's and her own, or Edith and Philip Dexter's?

She walked back to the telephone. "Hello, Julia, I'm sorry—"

There was no answer. Julia had evidently grown tired of waiting, and had hung up. Claudia was about to call her back, then she thought better of it. Julia had made her speech and there was nothing more to say.

Bobby and Bertha noticed the flowers as soon as they came home. "Ach," cried Bertha, pleased. "Mr. David, not?"

It was on the tip of Claudia's tongue to say, "Not." But

she refrained and merely smiled. It was kinder to let Bertha think the thoughts that pleased her.

Bobby was ill during the night and in the morning the doctor came, and said it was measles.

Toward noon, David telephoned. "Hello, darling, I just got in from Philadelphia. How's everything?"

"Fine—Bobby has the measles. Very lightly. So don't worry."

David said he wasn't worried, measles weren't anything.

Claudia hadn't wanted him to be upset exactly, but at least he could have shown a little fatherly consternation. "Measles are a lot," she informed him. "You can get all sorts of complications. I had them when I was a baby and I almost died of complications."

"Stop bragging. I'll be home for supper, darling."

"So nice of you," she retorted, acidly.

After she hung up, she called Philip Dexter. She had intended to write him a little note, but in view of what Julia had said, it pleased her to feel that it would be wiser to put nothing down on paper. (Not built for intrigue, indeed!)

The secretary said that Mr. Dexter was busy, who was calling?

Claudia hesitated. "Mrs. Naughton," she said faintly, feeling all the thrill of immorality. "It's nothing important."

"Oh, just a moment, please," the secretary interrupted, and an instant later Philip Dexter was on the wire saying "Hello," in the deep, quiet voice that she suddenly remembered all over again, like the pressure of his hand.

"Hello. . . ." said Claudia, with her heart thumping like a lunatic, and her hands cold. She thanked him for the flowers, and then she found herself telling him that Bobby

had the measles. He acted more like the boy's father than David—He was so sorry, did the child have it badly, was there anything he could do?

He called up every day for three days and sent a huge box of soldiers to boot. Claudia felt, guiltily, that it was a shame to take the money, as it were, because Bobby was practically well except for the handsome rash which made him feel very important. "When the rash disappears," she decided in rigid honesty, "I'm going to tell him that Bobby's absolutely recovered." She wondered what would happen after that? Something was bound to happen, because the telephone calls crowned each of her days like a lovely blessing, and she was sure that he, too, looked forward to them. Days had to have blessings, or there was no use in living. David seemed to have forgotten that. He was too busy to telephone each day, in the ritual of their early marriage. "I'm falling in love with someone else," she warned him in half earnest, but he only laughed and said, "Go ahead, but don't fall too hard."

On the fourth day of Bobby's illness, Claudia treated herself to another facial. The operator was pleased to see her again, and lured her into the purchase of an expensive nourishing cream to be applied before retiring. The cream was sticky and she rubbed the surplus on her hands, and put on an old pair of black gloves. David, coming in from his bath that evening, said, in a grieved fashion, "Hey, what's the big idea?"

"You're too sleepy to care, anyway," said Claudia, "and it's high time I took care of my skin."

"You're a pretty sight," said David, a little disgruntled.

"I'll be pretty tomorrow, which is a lot more important.

"What's tomorrow?"

"I don't know yet."

"I'll tell you what tomorrow is," said David, with intense satisfaction; "ten to one we wind up that Philadelphia commission."

There was something ironic in Philip Dexter's telephone call the next day. "How's the boy?" he asked.

"Bobby's perfectly all right," said Claudia, "but I'm afraid the baby's coming down with it."

"That's a shame—You're not worried, are you?" he added quickly.

"Not really, no. Bobby had it so lightly, it hardly seemed liked measles. And anyway, we're not sure about Matthew, there's no sign of a rash, he just seems fretful."

"I wonder," said Philip hesitantly, "if it wouldn't do you good to get away from the house for a little drive this afternoon?"

Claudia could hardly speak for pleasure. "Oh, I'd have adored it," she said, "but Bertha has to go to her aunt's funeral."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow's fine."

She hung up, with her head in the clouds. He'd called her "Claudia" in saying good-bye, and she had called him "Phil," stumbling a little over the sweet familiarity. It was strange how intimate they had become in those few short telephone calls. It was strange that each of them had become very important to each other. "Maybe it's just a beautiful friendship," Claudia thought. And, after all, was there anything more wonderful than friendship? People said that it couldn't exist between a man and woman, but she was certain that it could.

Bertha, hanging over the crib, debated a long while before she decided to go to the funeral. "Your aunt would be insulted if you didn't show up," Claudia said.

"Ach," cried Bertha, "such foolishness—I take his temperature again."

The baby's temperature was normal. "You're a fat old butterball," Claudia addressed him, in relief. "Tell Bertha, 'I'm not going to get the measles, I'm going to fool you.'"

Bertha quickly knocked on wood, and Claudia followed suit. "Well, I'll be back as soon as I can," Bertha reluctantly decided, and put on a black hat from which she had removed two red roses in deference to death.

She had been gone only a little while when the house telephone rang. "Mrs. Dexter is calling," the porter announced.

Claudia's heart skipped a beat. "*Mr.* Dexter," she corrected.

"Mrs. Dexter, Madame."

"Oh—Very well. Send her up."

Mrs. Dexter. What could she want? Perhaps Phil had mentioned that Bobby had had the measles and the baby seemed to be coming down with them. Perhaps it was a friendly call, thought Claudia appreciatively, hurrying to the door in welcome.

One glance at Mrs. Dexter's face, however, dispelled all idea of cordiality. She stood on the threshold, white, and a little breathless, with her dowdy, costly hat slightly atilt, and her full-lidded eyes hostile and accusing.

"Why, how do you do. Won't you come in?" asked Claudia, taken aback.

"I will, if you don't mind. What I have to say won't take long."

Claudia led the way into the living room. Mrs. Dexter wasted no time. "My husband is in love with you," she began immediately.

Claudia's first reaction was one of extreme gratification.

She almost said, "How wonderful, what makes you think so?" but Mrs. Dexter's bitter agitation held her silent and waiting. "I want you to know that you're breaking up a home," Mrs. Dexter went on hoarsely. "I want you to let him alone. You're young and you're selfish and you don't know what you're doing. You've got a husband and you've got children, but you're the kind of woman to whom ties don't mean anything, all you want is conquest and more conquest. You live for flattery and adulation. You dress your body in expensive clothes and dangle it before men's eyes like a banner."

Mrs. Dexter stopped for breath. Claudia couldn't help feeling flattered. Her impulse was to assure Mrs. Dexter that, except for the pink net, she'd never had a dress that had cost more than forty-nine fifty at a sale, but the picture of an abandoned Messalina was infinitely more alluring. She listened with a degree of pleased absorption, and denied nothing. This was a scene out of a play, not out of real life. Mrs. Dexter had no dimension of reality, she was a synthetic build-up of all the jealous wives in the world—at once pathetic and ludicrous and contemptible. And then suddenly, she felt sorry for Philip's wife. "You're imagining a lot of things," she hastened to explain. "Really you are . . ."

Edith Dexter pointed to the vase of languishing roses. "Do I imagine that he sent you those?" she demanded in a trembling voice. "No. They give the lie to all your denials. Phil sent white roses to me three times in our life. He sent them to me on our first wedding anniversary, and when little Phil was born . . . and when . . ." She couldn't go on.

Claudia felt a wave of pity, and tears came into her eyes. "I know," she said, softly. "And I think that when he sent

those roses to me the other day, in his heart he was sending them to you. I mean . . .” She paused. It was hard to express what she meant, and while she was looking for words that would neither wound nor preach, a strange whimpering cry came from Matthew’s room.

“It’s the baby,” she said swiftly. She started out of the room and then paused for a moment, indecisive. Mrs. Dexter was not fit to be left alone. Added to the bursting fury of her hatred and resentment, there was being born in her an intolerable humiliation. She had placed herself at another woman’s mercy. She had bared her bruised and aching soul, and it was too late to unlive the moment, to cover up all the pitiful nakedness of despair. Claudia saw, with a pang of fear, that Mrs. Dexter’s driven eyes darted to the window. Five flights up. It had been known to happen before. Mrs. Dexter was sick, unbalanced. And then the baby’s cry came again—haunting and strange, striking a new terror into her heart. “Wait!” she cried. “Oh, wait, I’ll be right back. . . .”

She hurried into the nursery, and bent swiftly over the crib. Matthew was asleep. Or was he? The lids had fallen over his eyes and in his small baby’s face there was a closed, withdrawn look that was not a part of sleep.

“Matthew!” Claudia cried out. “Matthew!” She bent to lift him. His body lay inert and lifeless in her arms. “He’s dead!”

The world swept from beneath her feet; the walls crowded in on her; the sound of oceans roared in her ears. And then he moved, and little jerking sounds came from his lips. She stared down at him. He was alive—he was dreaming. White—pale-white—blue-white. His little face seemed to shrink, and then all at once his body stiffened and arched.

"Oh, God, he's dying!" The cry burst from her in agony. She didn't know how or why—she didn't know what to do. . . . David! Bertha! Anyone! Matthew was dying, and she couldn't help him! She placed him back in the crib and somehow her feet were like blundering wings, and she found herself at the house telephone. "Quick! Quick! Go for the nearest doctor! My baby's dying, do you hear me, my baby's dying!"

She saw a figure in the living room turn away from the window. She had forgotten Mrs. Dexter. "My baby's dying!" she shrieked. "Help me. Oh, help me!"

"Mummy!" Bobby called out with interest from his bed. "What's the matter, Mummy! Is Matthew dying?"

She felt Mrs. Dexter's arm about her. "Hush. Where is the baby?" It was like someone else's voice—strong and firm, not Mrs. Dexter's voice.

Claudia flew down the hall, with Mrs. Dexter close behind her. Matthew lay stiff and blue, with his eyes rolling up into his head.

"Oh, my God!" sobbed Claudia. "What can we do, what can we do! Oh, God, take him if You must, only don't let him suffer!"

Edith Dexter lifted Matthew from the crib. "He's not suffering and he's not going to die," she stated brusquely. "It's only a convulsion, lot's of babies have them. They look a lot worse than they are. Quick. Run hot water in the tub, and get an enema bag ready. . . . And dry mustard. . . ."

Suddenly Mrs. Dexter turned into God; the way God sometimes takes over one's troubles when they get too heavy. Claudia did not question. She did as she was told—telephoned for a doctor, ran hot water in the tub, and found the mustard sitting on the kitchen shelf. "Good," said Mrs.

Dexter, nodding approvingly. She had slipped Matthew's clothes off and was headed for the bathroom. "Have you a canvas dressing table? And you'd better get some warm towels ready."

The bell rang. "The doctor!" they both exclaimed at once.

Claudia flew to the door, and flung it open. It wasn't the doctor, it was Philip. He stood, with a strained expression around his thin firm lips, and an air of tension in his manner. "My wife," he began. He stopped as he took in Claudia's distracted face. "She's here," he concluded briefly.

"Yes, she's here!" gasped Claudia.

He drew in his breath sharply. "She's made a scene—I'm desperately sorry. Where is she?"

"She's with the baby—Don't stop me—Oh, please—"

He was following her, keeping up with her, his long steps devouring the narrow hall. They stood together on the bathroom threshold. Claudia heard his low cry of amazement. Edith Dexter, with her dowdy hat thrown aside, was kneeling beside the tub, cradling Matthew in the hot, life-giving bath. She looked up.

"Phil!"

Claudia wrung her hands. "Oh, he's no better, he's still blue and stiff!"

Mrs. Dexter reached for the mustard. "Phil," she said quietly, without taking her eyes off the baby, "keep Claudia in the other room, tell her it isn't as bad as it seems—you remember young Phil had one of these when he was little. . . .

"I remember," said Philip Dexter. "What can I do to help?"

"Nothing. He'll come out of it."

The bell rang. "This must be the doctor surely!" Claudia cried.

"I'll let him in," said Phil. He was back again in an instant, followed by a young man with a bag in his hand and a small brown moustache. "I'm Doctor Leo Mack," he introduced himself a little pompously. "Well, well, what have we here?"

Edith lifted the baby from the tub, and rolled him in a towel on the dressing table. Claudia felt Philip Dexter's hand on her shoulder. "Come inside with me, dear—"

She pulled away from him. "No, no—I have to stay."

The doctor opened his black satchel, withdrew his stethoscope, and pressed it against Matthew's chest. "Heart's all right. We'll give him a high S.S., and I'll ask the questions later."

"He's had it, doctor."

"Are you the mother?"

"No," said Edith. "Just a friend."

It seemed hours after that Matthew lay in his crib, in quiet normal sleep, with Bertha blanched and shaken, watching by his side. "Measles," the young doctor reluctantly admitted in the living room, after he had searched for a more serious cause. "It happens occasionally when the rash goes inward. He'll be all right in the morning." He took his leave, with an air of hurrying on to more important cases.

Claudia turned to Philip's wife. There was so much that she wanted to say. And then she knew that there was no need to speak, for on Edith's face there was a look that had not been there before. She glanced at Philip. And then she left them together. "Someday," she thought, "I shall want David to look at me like that." She knew that there was a long road ahead of her before experience could crystallise into maturity. She knew there was a long road ahead of David, too. They must not lose each other on the journey.

Three

IT WASN'T LONG AFTERWARDS THAT EDITH SPRAINED HER ankle, and Claudia thought that under the circumstances it would be nice to drop in and see her, with a new book. It was a book that Claudia herself had received for tonsillitis, but had not read. It didn't even have the pages cut, and the paper in which it had been wrapped could still be folded back into its original creases, so it seemed like flying in the face of Providence not to pass it on while it was still on the best-seller lists. Claudia knew she'd never wade through it—it was too full of social consciousness—and David wouldn't bother with it either. He was at the stage where he had no patience with modern novels, and was re-reading the French Revolution, and the funnies on Sundays.

Edith had company when she arrived—a strange woman who seemed about to take her leave as Claudia was ushered into the upstairs sitting room. Edith, propped in an armchair with her bandaged foot on an adjoining ottoman, looked, to Claudia's quick eyes, as if she'd been crying. When she spoke, her voice was muffled and a little confused. "Oh, hello!" she said. "How nice of you, Claudia—"

"Hello," said Claudia, certain that three was a crowd at this particular moment. She glanced curiously at Edith's visitor. She was an odd sort of person—fat and thin in all the wrong places. She stuck out quite far behind, but her face was long and narrow and her legs looked like matchsticks beneath the uneven clinging of her cheap silk dress.

When she smiled, she showed a too-even row of white teeth, edged with orange-coloured gums. Something about the smile made Claudia decide that she was the person who made Edith's fine silk underwear, for Edith was the kind of plain-looking woman who was lacy and complicated underneath.

The visitor touched Claudia's arm very lightly. "I'm going to hear that I'd look wonderful in one of her one-piece combinations," thought Claudia apprehensively, knowing it would cost enough to feed the family for a week. But the woman merely remarked, with that ingratiating smile "You've got a beautiful white light over your head, dear. You brought it in the room with you."

Claudia, startled, looked upwards. Could she have dragged an electric bulb off the ceiling, the way one's sleeve occasionally catches at a piece of bric-a-brac in passing?

"How are the children, Claudia?" Edith nervously interrupted. "Do stay. Mrs. Gordon was just leaving."

"Two of the nicest little ones I'd ever want to look at," Mrs. Gordon nodded in approval. "Yes, dearie, I was just leaving. The baby, bless his little heart, had a bit of an upset now, didn't he? But he's all right again, and getting fat and strong."

"Oh, he's fine," said Claudia. She thought nothing of Mrs. Gordon's interest—Edith had probably been talking about Matthew. "Mrs. Dexter practically saved his life," she added generously.

But Mrs. Gordon wasn't listening. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were moving uneasily across her chest and abdomen. "It's not so very long, is it, the poor sweet soul—"

"Mrs. Gordon!" Edith's tone was imperious. "I wish you wouldn't!"

Mrs. Gordon opened her eyes. The pupils were dilated, and had the look in them of coming back from some vast hinterland of space. "Shame on you, dearie," she chided gently. "Denying a loved one the chance to communicate." She turned to Claudia. "It's your mother, dearie," she explained apologetically. "Burstin' in on me, she was; so happy to get to you, so anxious to say something."

Claudia's heart turned over within her. "My mother's dead," she stated quietly.

Mrs. Gordon shook her head. "Not dead, dearie. Passed on. But not dead. You know better than that, for you've got the Power yourself—Psychic as they came," she interpolated in an aside to Edith.

"Oh," said Claudia faintly. She remembered suddenly that Edith believed in spiritualism. Julia had let something drop to that effect. Julia had no patience with the supernatural. "Edith says this medium she goes to saved her sanity, but as far as I can judge, it's only messed her up—"

Claudia hadn't taken sides, one way or another. She believed firmly (as Mrs. Gordon had rather remarkably discerned), that those who died remained, in some strange way, alive, and close. She often felt as if her mother were very near, but this feeling of attunement lay locked within her, and she avoided talking of it, even with David, who preferred to believe that the soul perished with the body. Once, not long after her mother's death, Claudia was certain that she heard a series of small, regular knocks above the bed, but David said it was the radiator—and it was, which shut her up and made her feel slightly foolish in the bargain. Psychism, David had then taken occasion to point out, was not only undignified but half-witted, and in her chastened mood, she had been inclined to agree with him.

Mrs. Gordon's glib assumption, therefore, that her mother

was "bursting in on her," left Claudia coldly indifferent, particularly since her mother had never been the "bursting-in" sort. She smiled assuringly at Edith, who seemed increasingly embarrassed by the situation. "I dare say we've all got a certain amount of sensitivity," she said with a tact that refrained from treading on Edith's toes, yet clearly indicated to Mrs. Gordon that Claudia's glands were all in perfect working order.

Mrs. Gordon, however, was not to be defeated. "Sensitivity's another thing again," she insisted firmly. "You've got the Power, and it's a sin to deny it." She broke off with her eyes wide, and her arms stretched out. "There!" she whispered. "What did I tell you! It's The Indian! Right at your shoulder! White Wings himself, glory be to God—"

Instinctively, Claudia jumped and side-stepped, though she knew there wasn't a word of truth in it. "I think I'll have to be going," she said hastily.

"Be quiet!" The command sounded out in a deep, loud voice, and issued, surprisingly, from Mrs. Gordon's thin, pale lips. She stood like a stone statue, her eyes closed, and an expression of austerity upon her narrow face. "Be quiet!" she commanded again. "White Wings is helping your mother to come through to you. White Wings wishes you to open your mind and your heart in welcome to her. . . . Ah—there she is. Come to us, dearie, don't be shy." Mrs. Gordon's voice went back to its normal wheedle. "Oh, now you're getting stronger. That's nice, take your time, dearie." She opened her eyes. "Such a pretty little lady," she confided. "A sweet look about her, that she has. . . . Not tall, not short . . . nor yet plump, nor yet too thin."

Claudia's mouth tightened. She couldn't tolerate this crass exploitation of such love as had existed between her

mother and herself. "What colour hair has she?" she asked with irony, and could have sworn that Mrs. Gordon would glibly reply, "Not too light and not too dark."

But Mrs. Gordon was a little more subtle than that. She said, "When your mother went over, bless her soul, it was sort of grey, but when she was young, the way she's standing there now, it was sort of pale-brownish in colour. . . ."

Most people's hair, even redheads, Claudia decided, could be described with reasonable accuracy as "pale-brownish in colour." She turned to Edith, who was nervously twisting the edge of the afghan across her knees. "It's awfully nice of Mrs. Gordon to have bothered. It's been very interesting, really."

"White Wings wants you to go to the trumpet sitting tomorrow evening," Mrs. Gordon announced abruptly. "I'd a feeling he'd want her there," she injected in one of her confidential asides to Edith. She withdrew a card from her commodious, shabby purse. "Here's my address and it's ten dollars a person, but of course the sitting isn't open to everybody. It's just the Circle that's allowed to come, and anyone that White Wings tells me to let in. . . . What's that, White Wings? . . . Oh, your husband should go along with you, dearie, he's wanted, too."

Claudia all but laughed out loud. She took the card, wondering if, actually, there were fools who fell for this brand of brazen trickery. Her respect for Edith took a nose dive. Even grief did not excuse stupidity.

Edith must have sensed what she was thinking. "Can't you see that the trumpet sitting doesn't interest Mrs. Naughton?" she protested.

"But if her mother asks for her to be there?" argued Mrs. Gordon, bridling.

Claudia neatly put an end to the discussion. "I'm sorry I have a previous engagement," she declined.

Mrs. Gordon flounced to the door, with her skirts flapping around her thin legs. "After all, it's nothing to me, dearie, I'm only the channel," she said, tossing her head. Suddenly she stopped in the very middle of the toss. "Say it again, I can't make it out," she mumbled. She stood, motionless, in an attitude of listening. Then she made a short, swift gesture, as if to cut off further talk, and relayed the message on to Claudia. "It doesn't make much sense to me," she admitted, "but this is what your mother says to tell you. She says to tell you it was a fine joke you played on her, and she didn't find it out until she went over. She says to say you certainly fooled her good and proper."

Claudia could feel the floor bend beneath her. She reached for the arm of a chair. She started to speak, but her tongue turned dry and swollen in her mouth. When she came to herself, the echo of Mrs. Gordon's departing footsteps could be heard in the hall, and Edith was explaining in abject apology, the unfortunate circumstance of the medium's presence.

"I didn't expect her, you see; otherwise I'd never in the world have let you in for such a scene. But she literally forced her way to me, saying she had a message from my son." Edith's voice trembled. "Apparently he's been pleading for me to begin my sittings again."

Claudia's lips moved woodenly. "And are you going to?"

"I'd promised Phil never to see Mrs. Gordon again."

"Doesn't he believe in her at all?"

"He thinks the whole thing is a fake—a money-making racket from start to finish."

Claudia hesitated. "Has he ever—I mean—hasn't the

boy ever come through with anything that might convince him that there's a little something to it?"

"Phil?" Edith gave a small, bitter laugh. "I couldn't even get him to listen to a message much less go to a sitting. He steers clear of it like poison. It's his legal mind."

Claudia's heart sank. It wasn't the legal mind, it was the masculine mind. She knew she was going to have exactly the same sort of picnic with David.

"Anyway," Edith went on with difficulty, "after what happened this afternoon, I'm beginning to think he's right. It was so obvious, her attempt to get you interested. And nothing to it at all—just the same old line of talk. I feel as if I've been released from some horrible spell she had over me. Why Claudia, actually—I can say it now—White Wings came to mean more to me than my own flesh-and-blood husband. It gets you like that. It's worse than drink—or dope."

"But you—you still believe that—" Claudia was shy in phrasing the question—"you still feel close to your son, don't you? I mean, even if Mrs. Gordon is a fake it doesn't—destroy your faith in believing that there's something after death?"

"Never!" cried Edith passionately.

"I'm glad," Claudia murmured. In view of Edith's staunch conviction, she decided that it really wasn't necessary to upset the Dexter marriage all over again by announcing that Mrs. Gordon's childish performance had suddenly been dignified by an electrifying bit of evidence. Indeed, for a precious instant, it had been as if Claudia's mother had been standing in the room, with her dear essence filling the very air. *A fine joke you played on me.* It was, incredibly, what her mother would have said, and the way she would have said it. A joke. Yes, she and David had

played a joke—a poignant heart-breaking joke. But no one knew of it except themselves. So how could Mrs. Gordon have known?

She couldn't wait to put it up to David, logically and fairly. But he was late in getting home, and there was steak, which Bertha slipped under the broiler when she heard his key in the latch. That meant that there would be only six minutes to the time they sat down at the table, as David liked it raw, and Bertha was fussy about having it just right for him. Steak, to a steak-loving man, Claudia grimly concluded, as her glorious revelation waited upon the hipbone of a slaughtered cow, was entirely too much of a religion. There was no use even trying to bring up anything important before dinner because from the moment David smelled the onions, his whole morale was shot.

Nevertheless, he knew as soon as he laid eyes on her, that something was up. "What have you been getting into now?" he said, as he scrubbed his hands in the bathroom. That was one nice thing about David, she thought, as she watched him from the edge of the tub. He never washed he scrubbed—and always looked it, like a bed that's been thoroughly aired and made up freshly with clean sheets. "I said," he repeated, plunging his face into the basin of cold water, "what have you been getting into now?"

"What do you mean, 'now'?" demanded Claudia. "I resent that."

David snuffled into a towel, and then peered out at her with his eyelashes attractively matted up.

"You're rather handsome when you're wet," she remarked, waving a nice red herring in front of him. ("I'll wait until after the steak, to tell him he's going to a trumpet sitting. He'll take it better.")

"I'm extremely handsome," he acknowledged, rummaging in the medicine chest for his comb. "Who used my new blade?" he digressed abruptly.

Claudia swallowed. "What new blade?"

David threw the towel over his shoulder like a waiter, and devoted himself to a minute examination of his precious razor. She didn't care for the look on his face. "Now listen." She backed off apprehensively. "Please don't get a stroke over it. Nobody used it to shave with."

"I know nobody used it to shave with!" he bellowed. "You used it to clean windows!"

Claudia flushed with guilt. "Just to get off the tiniest grain of paint," Her anger flared. "And supposing. You ought to be ashamed, carrying on for a little thing like that!"

"Do you call it a little thing to rip a man's face to pieces!" he roared.

"I don't notice any ripped faces to pieces," she said stiffly. "All I notice is one very disagreeable person with a most unreasonable disposition."

"Unreasonable!" he sputtered. "Why don't you use your own razor for house cleaning!"

"Because I don't have a razor," she stated with quiet simplicity.

"Why should you, when you can use mine."

"Very seldom do I use yours; I'm too refined to grow much hair. Maybe once in a century, I've used it. When I put on an evening dress, and you take me out."

"So I never take you out," he interpreted correctly.

Her tactics changed. This was not the time to antagonise him, this was the time to sow the seeds for tomorrow night. "Oh, not that I mind," she smiled cheerily, but with a tinge of sadness. "I know you're head over heels in work. It was only being in New York for the winter, I'd rather wanted

to take advantage of things I can't do back in the country—"

"Such as what?" he queried distrustfully.

"Such as nothing in particular."

He softened. "What are you hinting at? Do you want to go to the theatre this evening?"

"Thank you, no. I'm a little tired. What about tomorrow evening?"

"I've got to stay at the office to go over blueprints with a builder."

Her jaw dropped in dismay. "Oh, heavens," she uttered.

"What's so important about tomorrow night?—Listen, I'm not going to be roped into another one of Julia's parties," he forestalled her.

"'Another one'! As if you'd ever gone to any of them. Anyway, this doesn't happen to be a party."

"What is it then?—When's that steak coming?"

"Supper is on," said Bertha, appearing on the threshold, much pleased with his impatience. "I was just here already to call you. . . ."

Ordinarily, Claudia ate like a horse, but tonight she could hardly swallow the choice piece of tenderloin that David insisted on her having. However, she simulated great enthusiasm for it in order not to arouse his suspicions. She would have liked to have waited until they were in bed to tell him about Mrs. Gordon—somehow bed always seemed the best place for a lot of things—but she felt that she couldn't hold it in one minute longer than the French fried potatoes, which were enough to put anybody in a good humour. They were long and thin and brown and crisp, and when David didn't even stop for a fork, she knew that this was the right moment to begin.

She sought about for an opening that would steal up on him in the dark, so to speak.

"I brought Edith a book today for her sprained ankle," she mentioned casually. "*Battle Cry*."

David pricked up his ears. "I hear that's worth reading. We have it, haven't we?"

She pressed her lips together in irritation. "We did have it," she amended briefly, and made a mental note to borrow it back from Edith.

She turned to Bobby. "Time for little boys to be asleep," she informed him. "Scat."

"Let him stay up a few minutes longer," David interceded. "I promised to show him a trick with matchsticks."

Claudia looked crucified. "We might as well be living in Grand Central Station," said she, "for all the privacy we get."

David put down his knife and fork, and stared at her, busily putting two and two together. "Good Lord," he said, "so that's it!"

"Oh, don't be silly, of course it isn't it!" she impatiently denied. "How could it be, I'd like to know?"

"That's what I was wondering. Well, come out with it, whatever it is."

She was disconcerted. This was getting nowhere by slow, sure steps. She decided to engage upon no more preliminary skirmishes. She glanced at Bobby, absorbed in the last-minute possibilities of his steak bone, and concluded that this particular little pitcher only had a big mouth. She took a deep breath. "Guess who I talked to today?" she queried nonchalantly.

"Whom."

"I said guess."

"'Whom,'" he said, "not 'who.'"

If you're going to split hairs," she retorted irritably, "be accurate. It should be 'To whom.'"

He snaked another French fried potato off the dish. "Right," he agreed affably. "To whom you talked today?"

She could have wept. This was no proper prelude to a conversation dealing with death and the hereafter.

"I bet you I know," he continued.

"I bet you don't!" she replied decisively.

"What do you want to bet?"

"I wouldn't take your money. Because you couldn't guess."

"All right. I give up. Who?"

"Mamma."

His mouth fell open. "What'd you say?"

"You heard me correctly."

Bertha, clearing the table, almost dropped the platter. She had attended Mrs. Brown's simple funeral less than a year ago, and the announcement startled her. At the same moment Bobby looked up from his bone. "Did Grandma come back?" he asked curiously.

Claudia wanted to say, "Grandma never went away." She was afraid, however, that the statement might confuse him, so she quickly covered herself and continued with a false animation, "Yes, I talked to Mr. Marma today about painting the barn this spring."

Bertha steadied the platter, and the colour flowed back to her plump cheeks. Bobby returned to his bone. "I'll tell you all about it later," Claudia hastily anticipated David's narrowed eyes.

"Tell me now," he said in a tone that meant business.

There was nothing to do but come out with it. She had to spell some of the words on account of Bobby, who thought at that point that they were talking about candy, and she had to switch to jibberish while Bertha served the apple pie and coffee. But, on the whole, David got a pretty clear idea of

the story. For a long moment, he said nothing. And then he said everything. Claudia covered her ears. "Aren't you ashamed," she demanded hotly, "to use such language in front of a child!"

"Aren't *you* ashamed!" he countered, "to listen to such—"

"Don't!" she stopped him. "Bobby used that word the other day and he said he'd heard you say it!"

"Daddy always says it," Bobby corroborated pleasantly.

Claudia threw up her hands. "You see?"

"It's a perfectly good word," he maintained, "to describe the kind of twaddle you've been telling me. This Gordon woman ought to be behind bars." His face darkened ominously. "She could be put there too, by all that's holy. Fortune telling's against the law."

"She didn't tell my fortune, she just said I had a beautiful white light above me."

"That was your brains leaking out she saw."

"Oh, you're impossible—Bobby, go to bed and don't aggravate me!"

Bertha appeared, and swept Bobby off beneath her commodious arm. Claudia, no longer hampered by his presence, allowed herself free scope. "Look here, David Naughton," she confronted him with blazing eyes. "You can't deny such absolute evidence!"

"What evidence?" David inquired, being maddening.

"I already told you what evidence. The joke that Mrs. Gordon spoke about. How on earth could she have known that we fooled Mamma up to the last minute into thinking I didn't even realize she was ill—desperately ill?"

David scowled. "Nonsense. A joke could mean anything."

"For example?"

He floundered a little. "Well, anything at all. The

woman saw you were gullible, and took a long shot."

"I wasn't gullible! I discounted everything. But everything!—Except that one thing."

"Well you can discount that, too," said David firmly. "Believe me, it's a lot of—"

"That's enough," she said coldly. "I can only say that if I were a spirit, I'd be furious. Just because a person hasn't got a body any longer, is no reason to ignore them or call them a liar. I wouldn't dream of insulting Mamma by not going tomorrow evening."

David's left brow slid up his forehead. "Going where, may I ask?"

Claudia clenched her hands. He was worse than Philip Dexter. The manlier the man, she reflected, the more pig-headed he was apt to be.

"We've been invited to a trumpet sitting," she brazenly announced.

Because he didn't fly off the handle, she knew that there was real trouble ahead. He took out his pipe, filled it and tamped the tobacco carefully with his finger. He lit the pipe, looked down at it along the stem, and puffed at it.

"I don't care whether you go or not, but I'm going," she finally burst out.

"Over my dead body."

"Is that supposed to be a pun?"

"Let's go to a movie," he answered, with an air of letting bygones be bygones.

"I'm going to the trumpet sitting," she repeated firmly.

He froze up again. "Very well. After you leave the trumpet sitting, start for Reno."

She could feel herself becoming hysterical with a kind of frustrated anger. Before she knew it, she was in tears, and after that, it was all much easier. He snorted of course,

when she mentioned the twenty-dollar admission fee, and offered to settle the whole affair by giving her twenty-five for her personal use. She could only shake her head in pity of his grossness.

"White Wings," said she, "understands me a great deal better than you do."

"I was afraid of that," said David glumly.

He was silent for a moment, and then all at once he leapt up from his chair, and gave an Indian war whoop that pierced her very eardrums. He lunged at her, and grabbed her in his arms. "You turn into one of those cockeyed females and I'll wring your neck!" he ground out against her lips.

She tried to push him away, but she might just as well have pushed against the Rock of Gibraltar. She marvelled at his strength. She wondered whether Philip Dexter had ever grabbed hold of Edith that way. It couldn't stop a person from believing in life after death, but it certainly went a long way toward making life before death an interesting and exciting experience. She thought, with her senses swooning, "If only he weren't so damned narrow-minded he'd be perfect. . . ."

The white card that Mrs. Gordon had given her bore across its middle the printed inscription, ANGELA GORDON, and below, in the right-hand corner, the address and telephone number of an apartment house on the upper West side. In the left-hand corner, there was a list of Mrs. Gordon's talents: Trance, Psychometry, and Trumpet Sitzings. "It really does look as if she's an awful fake," Claudia admitted to herself, as she dialed the number.

Mrs. Gordon's stridently amiable voice answered at once. "I was standin' here waitin' for your call, dearie," she started

off, before Claudia had a chance to speak. "Quite a time you had with your husband last night, wasn't it? I mean convincin' him to come to the sitting this evening?"

"Why—yes—" Claudia faltered. "How on earth did you know?"

"White Wings was right at your side, during the whole argument dearie. He says to tell you you've got a very stubborn young man there, but not to worry, he'll come around all right. And the sitting begins at seven thirty; don't be late, the spirits don't like to be kept waiting."

Claudia wet her lips. "We'll be on time," she stammered, and hung up the receiver.

A voice said at her elbow, "Tell Mamma bye-bye!"

She jumped so that she almost upset the baby carriage. "Oh, Bertha!" she quavered, "You scared me!"

She had an ignominious impulse to ask Bertha to forego her morning in the park with Matthew, but she controlled it. Still, she hated being alone. A window shade snapped to the top without anybody touching it. The telephone rang, and when she hurried to answer it, there was no one there. "I didn't call you, Madame," the operator crisply informed her.

"You *must* havel!" Claudia insisted in agitation.

"Sorry, Madame." The operator was conciliatory but firm. "Excuse it, please."

Claudia was aware that her knees were trembling. She glanced at her watch. Eleven o'clock. She had planned to take a bath and wash her hair before luncheon, but she decided suddenly to skip the bath. She wondered if she'd ever again feel free to indulge in such human occupations as might shock an Indian gentleman who had gone on to spiritual planes. "If this keeps up," she thought nervously. "I'll be having all sorts of inhibitions."

She was even more nervous after David came home, "Well," he began jovially, "how's Elephant Pants—I mean White Wings?"

"Oh, hush!" she implored. But he didn't pay any attention to her, and went from bad to worse. Ordinarily she wouldn't have minded. . . .

His high spirits filled her with misgiving. He was up to no good, that was plain. "Don't you dare try to pull anything at the séance," she warned him, as they drove across the park in a taxi.

"I'm not going to pull anything," he said blandly, "I'm just going to cure you of this nonsense. I'm going to let you have your little bellyful of it, and then you'll be satisfied."

"You're so smart," said Claudia caustically.

The car drew to a stop before an ordinary little flat near the river. Up four flights of stairs they puffed, to where Mrs. Gordon waited in an open doorway to welcome them. "My dears," she said, like Roosevelt. Then she didn't say anything at all, but merely stood and gazed intently at David.

Claudia was curious. "Has he got a light above his head, too?" she asked.

"Dearie, he has more than a light," Mrs. Gordon said, with a trace of awe. "He could be a Master—"

"And I could be a Mistress," Claudia whispered, as they followed Mrs. Gordon down a dim, narrow hall.

"How you can fall for that stuff," David muttered. "The woman's obviously cracked."

The small parlour into which she ushered them was filled with people. "Intelligentsia," Claudia murmured, in pleased surprise. But David said sourly that it wasn't intelligence, it was just that there was something wrong with them. There were eight in all—two men who looked like women, one woman who looked like a man, and a melancholy

couple by the name of Davidson. Mr. Davidson was very tall and thin with the interesting complexion of a writer or a professor, but David, after sizing him up, decided that it was only liver.

"When Miss Cronin comes, we'll all be here," Mrs. Gordon announced in her loud, clear voice. "Will the gentlemen please put the chairs around in a circle—" she broke off, adding, "Here she is now."

You could have knocked Claudia over with a feather when Amelia Cronin rushed in, full of apologies for being late. Amelia was a concert pianist for whom Julia had given a tea only last week. She was quite statuesque, with a great mass of hair coiled at the nape of her neck, and spaces between her teeth, which spoiled everything. She recognized David at once, and donned a helpless air when she shook hands with him. "I think," thought Claudia, "that she'd rather have a husband than a piano. It's too bad about her teeth."

"How exciting to find you here!" Amelia cried. "Were you always interested in the Psychic, or is it through Julia?"

Claudia was vastly amused. "Through Julia? Why Julia would lose all respect for us if she knew we'd come to a thing like this."

Amelia frowned. "Julia has had wonderful experiences with Mrs. Gordon," she said, a little stiffly.

"Why, the old hypocrite!" gasped Claudia. "David, did you hear that?"

"I heard," said David grimly. He pulled her aside. "Now you know where Mrs. Gordon got her information about you and your mother," he snugly pointed out.

"As if Julia would talk!"

"She probably didn't realize she was talking. That's part of the game."

"But don't be silly, how did Mrs. Gordon know she was going to bump into me at Edith's!"

"There's a sucker born every day in the week," said David, "and a medium gets what she can when she can, and lives in hopes."

"That's far-fetched," Claudia argued stubbornly. But inwardly it was something of a shock to discover that Mrs. Gordon had very likely taken a chance on the name of Naughton. It was even possible that Julia had gone out of her way to contact Claudia's mother at a sitting, for Julia didn't know a great many people on the Other Side. "Social climbing," Claudia giggled irreverently.

"We're ready," Amelia said in a hushed tone. "We'd better start to sit down."

David sprinted forward with alacrity. He was all for taking the seat next to Mrs. Gordon, but she waved him away, and beckoned Mr. Davidson to her side instead. Then David tried to sit near a lamp, but Mrs. Gordon told Amelia to sit there, which left David beside Amelia, and Claudia next to one of the men who looked like a woman.

After everyone was settled, Mrs. Gordon made a little speech. She said, "We have some newcomers to our Circle tonight, so I will explain that the séance must be conducted in darkness, or our dear ones can't come through. There was a case in Brooklyn, where one of the sitters wanted to see where the medium kept the rabbits—" She waited for the deprecatory laughter which attended this sally—"so he switched up the light, and the ectoplasmic cord was snapped off and the medium collapsed of shock. So please, no lights, because it's very dangerous."

"That fixes you, mister," Claudia said *sotto voce* to her husband, and David didn't deny it.

"It was really a frightful case," Claudia's neighbour confirmed. "I knew the medium."

Claudia turned to him with interest. "What kind of a cord did she say snapped?"

"The ectoplastic."

"Oh," said Claudia, none the wiser.

"Are we all ready?" Mrs. Gordon sang out. "Then Mr. Davidson will please switch off the lights."

Mr. Davidson reached out a long arm, and plunged the room into darkness. It was more than dark. It was black, pitch-black.

"We will now place our hands on our knees," Mrs. Gordon intoned, "and say the Lord's prayer. 'Our Father which art in heaven . . .'"

A lump came into Claudia's throat. She could never hear the Lord's prayer without being profoundly moved. She was glad when the chant died away, and Mrs. Gordon's matter-of-fact and slightly nasal voice commanded everyone to complete the circle and join hands. It was good to feel David's strong warm fingers encircle her own, but she wished she didn't have to hold hands with her other partner, whose grasp was soft and a little damp.

"Now, dearies," Mrs. Gordon continued, "let's all relax, and invite our dear ones to come through. Just talk about anything you like, and be natural."

It was hard to be natural under the circumstances. Conversation started, and stopped. Claudia's partner said, "You've never been to a sitting before?"

"Never," said Claudia. "What's that little glow over there, or do I imagine it?"

"That's the trumpet!"

"Explain it, Noel," Mrs. Gordon suggested.

Noel explained it. He said, "When we've generated

enough power to lift it, it will waft over the room, and the voices will talk to each one of us in turn, or Little Doris will talk, if the spirits aren't strong enough. Little Doris is Mrs. Gordon's control. She's about ten years old and died almost a century ago."

"Boloney," David injected in a rude *sotto voce*.

Claudia had never admired the expression, and now she considered its usage particularly obnoxious in such close proximity to the Lord's prayer. Before she could reprimand him, however, Mrs. Gordon announced, disapprovingly, that the conditions were very bad.

There was a low rush of agreement from the others. Claudia fidgeted with embarrassment. She knew perfectly well that David was the discordant note in their midst, and she also knew that they knew it.

"We'd better sing to correct the condition," Mrs. Gordon continued. "What shall it be?"

"'Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory!'" Mrs. Davidson timidly called out.

Then everybody sang "Mine Eyes," and after that Noel, Claudia's neighbour, started "A Bicycle Built for Two," and gaily, they all took it up with great gusto. Claudia's hand was swung back and forth in Noel's to the tune of it, and she felt like two little girls walking to school. She wanted to pull away, but he held on, and there she was, swinging along and feeling silly, while her other hand lay in David's terribly static grasp. There was no doubt that he was not only bored, but ill at ease. He was not the sort of person who could open his mouth and sing along even under the most propitious circumstances. It was a gift, Claudia decided, to be able to join in a chorus, and look happy about it. David did not have that gift, and neither did she.

She was greatly relieved when the singing died away, and

a hush fell upon the group. And then, to her astonishment, the phosphorescent light wavered, and lifted slowly into the air. Before she could collect her wits, the silence was torn by a loud war whoop. She almost jumped out of her skin.

"Don't be frightened," Noel whispered. "It's White Wings."

White Wings? She knew better. It was David, going through his monkey shines. She almost sank through the floor with mortification. But was it David? Could it be, when the voice was sounding from the other side of the room?

"Greetings, my friends!"

"Greetings, White Wings!"

"I am here," White Wings proclaimed, like a deep bell tolling. "Peace be with you."

Claudia was confused. So this really was White Wings! She could almost see him—powerful and tender and full of ancient wisdom. No wonder Edith was crazy about him.

The light came toward her, and something bumped ever so softly against her temple. She uttered a small cry. White Wings' voice sounded close to her ear. "Do not be alarmed, Little One. The trumpet touches you in friendly greeting."

"Answer him," Noel prompted helpfully. "Always greet Them."

"Hello . . ." Claudia quavered.

"Peace be with you," said White Wings, and almost simultaneously, he was talking to Mrs. Davidson.

"Loud-speaker," David mumbled.

A child's shrill laughter filled the room. The group rustled with delight. "It's Little Doris!" "Hello, Little Doris! Come talk to me, Doriel!" "No, come over this way, Doriel!"

Little Doris was a scream, Noel whispered. And indeed,

little Doris turned out to be something of a show-off. The trumpet bobbed gaily, lightly, from one to the other, and from within it, Little Doris tossed out pert quips for which Bobby would have been soundly reprimanded. Little Doris was no less than fresh.

"Here's a Mr. Smart Man," she gleefully proclaimed, as the trumpet bumped on David's head. "He thinks he knows it all!"

Claudia knew that Little Doris was playing with fire. If Little Doris didn't look out, she was going to get into trouble. David didn't like spoiled children in the flesh, and he certainly wasn't going to stand for any nonsense from a spirit brat. His hand wrenched away, and Claudia could feel him make a lunge to catch the trumpet as it hovered before him. But he wasn't quick enough. The light flickered off, and Little Doris was saying to Amelia, "That's a pretty dress you bought today," and added slyly, "White Wings loves yellow!"

"I know it," Amelia admitted with a tremulous little laugh.

Claudia expected David to make some bawdy comment at this point. Surprised at his restraint, she reached toward him. Her fingers met an empty chair. She almost perished of fright. What had happened to him? Had he been spirited away? Her nerves were screaming and taut. The dense blackness and the religious songs had combined to plunge her into a veritable nightmare of unreality. She felt a pressure on her knee. She all but screamed. The pressure deepened, and held. David's hand. She'd felt it often enough in the dark to know that it was his hand, unmistakably. But what was he doing, miles away from his chair? He had no right to be crawling around on the floor with a roomful of spirits turned loose. Even at this

moment, the departed ones were beginning to come through, and a husky, almost indistinguishable voice was saying to Mrs. Davidson, "It's Alice!"

Tears choked Mrs. Davidson's quavering reply. "Oh, Alice, are you happy? . . ."

Alice whispered that she was very happy, and didn't have any more pain. . . .

"Please come back," Claudia implored David under cover of the ghostly *tête-a-tête*. "Please—"

"Noel thought she was entreating the trumpet to return. "It will," he assured her. "You'll get a message."

As if in answer, the light flickered toward her, and a voice souged through the trumpet, saying, "It's Mother. . . ."

Claudia was astonished to feel herself unmoved by the announcement—in the first place, she had always called her mother "Mamma." Nevertheless, she said politely, "How do you do. . . ."

"I'm so glad you came," the voice sighed on. "So glad. . . ."

For the life of her, Claudia couldn't think of any suitable repartee. Noel pushed her a little. "Say anything," he instructed feverishly. "Just keep on talking or the power won't generate."

Claudia fished desperately in her mind. "Are you feeling better?" she brought out after an awkward delay.

"No more pain—so happy—. You must come again next week. 'I'rying so long to get through to you. . . ."

The message faded away and the trumpet wafted onward. "Did you have a nice little talk with your mother, dearie?" Mrs. Gordon queried brightly.

"Very nice."

Now the trumpet was talking to Noel. "Yes, Charlie,"

Noel was saying in an undertone, creating a very special privacy between himself and his departed friend.

Charlie said, in a husky whisper not very different from the voice of Claudia's mother, "Worried about tomorrow. Don't let them take advantage of you. . . ."

"I shan't, old boy, you may be sure of that," said Noel, being very virile about it. "Tell me, are you keeping on with your work over there?"

"Yes," the voice whispered. "Dancing . . . and raising flowers. . . ."

"Oh, but that's marvellous!" Noel cried.

The trumpet moved toward David, who fortunately had returned to his seat. "Hello. . . ." it moaned.

David vouchsafed no return. Claudia shoved him. "Say something!" she urged, like an old habitue.

"Hello," said David, grudgingly.

"This is Father . . ." the voice sighed.

"That's fine," said David, with bare civility.

"Glad you came, boy . . . been so long . . . trying so hard . . . very tired. . . ."

"Don't overdo yourself," David suggested tersely.

The trumpet started to move away, wavered, and came back again. "Nibs . . . Nibs . . ." the voice said. A little silence. And then two more words. "Water . . . cheek. . . ." That was all. The trumpet dropped to the floor with a clatter, and lay on its side. Nothing happened. It just continued to lie there, dead.

"The power's been cut off," Mrs. Gordon finally exclaimed in genuine stupefaction. "Dear me, that's quite a surprise, and without even the closing prayer from White Wings—The conditions were bad, that's what it was. Lights on, please!"

The lights went up, bright and glaring. Claudia rubbed

her eyes, feeling stunned, and a little empty. Everyone wore the same look—even David. He sat there, not moving, his face set and a little pale.

"Eleven o'clock," Mr. Davidson said, consulting his watch.

Noel sat dreamily. "I had a marvellous experience . . ." He rose, and turned to Claudia. "Tell me," he asked her tensely; "did you feel any touch around your knees?"

Claudia flushed. "N—no . . ." she faltered.

"Well, I felt something," Noel confided unsteadily. "Extraordinary. The first time it's happened—My hands weren't free, or I could have almost touched the fingers. They were so light . . . exquisite . . . a perfect materialization. . . ." He drifted off, his face uplifted. Claudia's gaze followed him, holding more pity than contempt. She saw him pull his friend aside.

Amelia came up. "Wasn't it wonderful?" she breathed, exalted. "The conditions weren't good for anyone else, but I had a divine manifestation just the same—Something I was waiting for, and knew would happen." She moved on, smiling mysteriously.

David got to his feet. "Come on, let's get out of here," he said.

"Let's," said Claudia.

He was nice about not being an I-told-you-so. He didn't say a word, even after they were in the taxi.

"You made two people very happy this evening," she remarked.

He looked at her. "What do you mean?" he asked, sharply.

"Don't bite my head off. When you were crawling around the floor, Noel thought you were a spirit, playing with his knees. Amelia did, too."

"Poor fools."

"Yes, aren't they? Their being taken in like that cured me. Completely. When you're in the pitch-dark, and sing hymns, and think of all the people you know who aren't here any longer, you're ready to believe anything."

David gave a short laugh. "That about sums it up," he said.

"I'm sorry we spent the money," she went on meekly. "Excuse it, please."

"Oh, that's all right," he said.

He fell into another silence.

"Have you a headache?" she asked him a little timidly.

"It was hot in there."

"Stifling. I think it is liver," she conceded generously. "Mr. Davidson, I mean. And I felt like kicking Mrs. Davidson, swallowing all that nonsense about Alice. But, David, how does she do it? Mrs. Gordon, I mean. Granted that Elephant's Pants is a loud-speaker, how on earth does she do Little Doris?"

"Ventriloquism," said David, briefly.

"Noel says when the conditions are good—" Claudia paused to grin—"they have fragrances, and cold breezes and a lot of other little side shows. It must be worth ten dollars admission."

"Possibly."

Monosyllables always made her uneasy. Was he really annoyed with her? Had she sacrificed his respect by going to the sitting in the first place? She tried a new attack. "Can you imagine Julia of all people falling for that stuff? And never letting on! Well, I suppose when a woman loses her ovaries, she's apt to lose a little of her intelligence along with them."

This remark was distinctly up his alley, but he just kept staring out of the window in gloomy silence. She sighed.

She was glad when the taxi drew to a stop before their door. She was glad to be home.

The apartment seemed natural and normal, and the children were sleeping sweetly. She lingered beside them. Bobby stirred. "Shhh . . ." she said, and hastened quickly from the room.

David was already undressed.

"There's cold chicken in the ice-box," she tempted him.

"No, thanks."

He waited until she was undressed too, so that he could open the windows. He stood, looking down into the street.

"You'll catch cold," she called to him, snuggling beneath the covers. "I thank goodness for a double bed tonight," she thought. How any woman in her right senses could prefer a dead Indian to a live husband was more than she could see.

"Darling," she whispered. "I'm so very cured. Kiss me."

He leaned over and kissed her.

She said, "That was no great shakes of a kiss."

It was plain that he had something else on his mind beside kisses. "Did I ever tell you about a room-mate I had in my freshman year at college?" he asked her suddenly.

"No, you didn't. What's the matter, is he in town?—Have him up for supper," she added, largely.

"I can't," said David. "He got drowned. It happened at college. He was only a kid. Eighteen."

"Isn't that terrible? We must caution Bobby—"

"Are you sure I never mentioned him to you?"

"Positive."

Then David said, in a strange voice, "I didn't think I did. We used to call him Nibs. He had a scar on his cheek—"

"Oh," said Claudia. Goose-flesh started to come out

on her, until she remembered it was all a racket. "Julia or Hartley," said she. "Without a doubt."

David shook his head. "That was the first thing I thought of, too. But it's impossible. Hartley was in England when it happened. He didn't even know the boy, or anything about him. And he wasn't married to Julia until a year later."

"Oh," said Claudia again.

She lay back, next to him, and for a long while neither of them spoke.

"How do you explain it?" she asked at length, in a small voice.

"I don't know," said David. "That's what I've been trying to figure out. Thought transference, I suppose."

"But were you thinking of him?"

"I haven't thought of him in years."

"Then how could it be thought transference?"

"Go to sleep," said David. "I've got a big day tomorrow."

It must have been hours later that she awakened. She didn't know what woke her up. And then she saw a light, a bright, beautiful light trailing across the ceiling. It bathed the whole room in a translucent and unearthly glow.

She sat bolt upright, and shook David's arm in frenzy. "David! Wake up!" She pointed with a shaking finger to the moving ray. "Do you see that light, or am I dreaming?"

David cocked one eye open. "Certainly I see that light," he growled, and sounded just like he always did. "It's an automobile going down the block, you cluck!"

A moment later the room was once again in darkness, and Claudia, feeling a little foolish, went to sleep.



Four

CLAUDIA DIDN'T BELIEVE IN BIRTHDAYS. SHE SAID THAT THE one thing in human experience that was absolutely compulsory, was to get born dead or alive, so why make a fuss over doing it? It wasn't as if only privileged or talented people had birthdays, but everybody had them, nobody could get out of them. David said that her advanced point of view was a great relief to him, and it was wonderful that he didn't have to worry about buying her a sable coat or a string of pearls every tenth of December.

This particular tenth of December, he not only didn't buy her a sable coat, but he woke up in the morning, kissed her just as usual, and went about his business without so much as saying "Boo." Claudia could feel her lips getting tighter and thinner by the minute. He seemed to have completely forgotten that twenty-four years ago to the day she had been brought into this world. When they were first married, he had made a great to-do about the date—he had brought her flowers, and had paid eight eighty apiece for theatre tickets (which upset her even now to think of it), and had taken her to a night club in the bargain. The next year, he's started off with exactly the same shenanigans, but she'd nipped them in the bud. "Thanks just the same, but I'd rather have the money for the January sale of sheets."

The following years he'd kissed her and had said, uncomfortably, "Sure you won't let me give you anything?"

"Definitely not, forget it," she'd maintained, and had been rewarded by his deep respect for such extreme libera-

tion—also by a box of candy, and a dozen roses because he was weak-minded.

This year, however, she might have been the wind blowing for all he knew or cared that it was December tenth. Not even so much as, "Well, how does it feel to be an old lady?" She'd have kicked his shins if he had said it, but just the same, it would have been better than nothing. "I won't remind him," she decided, and found satisfaction in contemplating him coldly while he devoured his breakfast.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing. Why should anything be the matter?"

"You look like a martyr." He broke a piece of toast. "That's the surest way for a wife to ruin a marriage."

"I know surer ways." She wanted to say, "Forget your wife was ever born," but then he'd probably be contrite and explanatory. ("I thought you didn't believe in birthdays," he'd say, like a fool), and the whole thing would be very anti-climatic. No. It was far better to sit in silence, and feel abused.

"You eat toast like a maniac," she observed. "I need ear mufflers."

"At least I don't dunk it," he stuck up for himself.

"I wouldn't trust you with a doughnut."

He was grieved. "You don't love me."

"Very little."

"What'd I do?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Want to go anywhere tonight?"

"Thank you, no."

"That's good. I might have to stay at the office and check up on some plans."

She shrugged. "Which doesn't surprise me in the least. Once an architect, always an architect."

"That's right," he agreed, glibly. "Little drops of water, little grains of sand—"

"Make Jack a dull boy," she ended significantly.

"Am I dull?" he asked, surprised.

"Are you dull!"

"I didn't think I was dull," he said.

"Oh, you're not, you're dynamic. I quiver with passion at your touch."

"Say, what's wrong with you, anyway?" he inquired, mildly, very mildly concerned.

"Not a thing."

"I thought maybe something was," he said and went off, gay as you please, without another word.

Five minutes after the door closed upon him, Julia telephoned. She said that she and Hartley were leaving for a short trip South, but she wanted to congratulate Claudia before she went. Julia always remembered birthdays. She had a regular system for anniversaries of all kinds—like income tax. She opened a little brown leather book every morning, as regularly as she bent twenty times for her figure, and glanced through it. In that way, she never forgot things, and she never had to remember things—which was an excellent system for anyone with in-laws. She said now, "Hold on a minute."

Claudia knew what was coming. Hartley always rode in on Julia's competency. "Hello," he boomed out, sounding very portly, as if he was in a magenta dressing gown and smelling of expensive shaving soap. "How does it feel to be an old lady?"

"Oh, fine," said Claudia, a little too pleasantly.

"Julia's sending along a bit of a cheque," he said. "It'll reach you tomorrow. Treat yourself to something."

"Oh, Hartley!" Claudia protested, "you know I don't believe in birthdays—"

She was about to ring off, when Julia took the wire again. "By the way, I've got a box for tonight, in case you're interested."

Claudia wasn't interested. Julia always had boxes—boxes for dance recitals, boxes for concerts, boxes for string quartets. This time it was a box for a Russian 'celloist. "Biblovitch. It's his first appearance in America—and he's very fine."

Claudia could think of nothing she'd rather do less than hear Mr. Biblovitch play the 'cello with an accent for two hours. "I'm afraid David has something planned," she lied, feeling like Patience herself smiling at Grief. She brushed a tear out of her eye as she hung up. "The bloom is definitely off this marriage," she told herself, "and I might as well face it." Indeed, the bloom was so definitely off, that not even Bobby mentioned the fact that it was her birthday. Ever since he could toddle, he'd always run into her room (not too subtly prompted by his father), and planted a wet kiss that slid from her cheek to her lips.

"Happy birthday," he would lisp. "For goodness sake," she would say, "Mother doesn't believe in birthdays, but thank you just the same, darling."

This morning, without a suggestion of a lisp, he had burst in on her, and cried, "Can I have ten cents?"

Claudia had smiled. Bobby was growing up, and his technique was changing—the ten cents was probably to be changed into a handsome stiff handkerchief, with a pink and green forget-me-not embroidered in the corner. But, no. Bobby had had no such idea in mind. It appeared that the ten cents was purely for his personal use—a bottle of glue to make an aeroplane.

"Let's see the plane, son," David had put in, gratified by such mechanical leanings.

"Does it occur to either of you that I might like a little privacy while preparing for my bath?" Claudia had asked frigidly.

And they had given her the privacy, and nothing else.

The morning passed slowly, with not even a peep out of Bertha, who, last year, had made a large cake, encircled with candles, and had brought it in the dining room with Fritz holding open the swing door and smiling his nice toothy smile. There was no doubt in Claudia's mind that people were closer to each other in the country than in the city. There was nothing else to do in the evenings. "If we were back on the farm, I bet you twenty cents David wouldn't have forgotten it was my birthday," she thought.

He always telephoned at noon, but today he telephoned at eleven. "Surprise!" he said.

So. At last he'd remembered. Claudia said nothing. A fine time to think of it.

"I said 'Surprise!' " he repeated.

"It's too late now," Claudia repulsed him, wallowing in self-pity. "Why didn't you say something before you left for the office?"

"I didn't know it then. I only just found out."

"Who told you—Julia?" Her tone was bitter.

"Julia doesn't know them from Adam."

Claudia frowned. "Who from Adam?" This was getting complicated.

"Hoot, mon," said David. "They're here."

Claudia's blood chilled. She didn't have to ask any more questions. The Ferrises, who had been hanging over their heads for weeks, must have finally arrived from Los Angeles.

"Well," said David, a little petulantly, "what are you going to do about it?"

"What am *I* going to do about it? They're your friends, not mine!"

"Mrs. Ferris was very decent to you," David reminded her. "She had you for dinner, and put her car and chauffeur at your disposal—"

"I'll go her one better," Claudia broke in. "I have no car and chauffeur, but I've got a perfectly worthless husband whom I'll be *glad* to put at the lady's disposal."

David had no time for repartee, good or otherwise. "Talk sense, will you?" he said impatiently. "I've a client waiting. What do you want to do about them?"

"I don't want to do anything about them. I just want to ignore the whole thing as a typographical error. Friends-from-out-of-town were not included in the marriage ceremony to which I said 'I do.'"

"It's an unwritten law. All wives are supposed to have friends-out-of-town up for dinner and be nice to them."

"All right. I'll have them up to dinner, but I won't be nice to them. When do we have to do it?"

"Tonight. Let's get it over with."

"Tonight!" This was adding injury to insult.

"What's wrong with tonight?"

It was as if he had thrust a knife through her. She couldn't talk for being hurt.

"Listen," he pointed out, oblivious, "it could be a lot worse. If they came in the spring, we'd have to have them for a weekend at the farm."

There was truth in this. Guests in the country were a seasonal abomination—like cutworms, or rose bugs. It was indeed far better to suffer the Ferrises for a single evening in town. An inspiration came to her. "Bibliovitch!" she

cried. Bibliovitch—if the box was still available—would serve as an adequate, cultured, and economic means of keeping them occupied for the hours between dinner and bedtime.

"They mightn't be musical," David brought up.

"Oh, but they are. They wanted to take us to a concert, too, don't you remember? Only I was too smart for them—no, sir, I didn't travel three thousand miles to hear somebody hear himself play."

"Maybe they'll feel the same way about it."

"Then it serves them right. They're going to be done to, as they would have done by."

"They're going to be done by as they would have did to," David corrected.

"One way or another, they're going to take Bibliovitch and like him."

"The only trouble," he gloomily demurred, "is that we'll have to take him, too. Couldn't we leave them there?"

"That's masterly!" she approved. "We can go to a movie and call back for them."

"Very good," said David. "Very good indeed."

Claudia rang off, annoyed with herself because she had allowed him to get chummy with her when she should have kept on being distant and chilly. That was the trouble with an intimate marriage—exigencies of grief, happiness, and adversity always cemented it closer. She wondered, as she called Julia, under just what heading the Ferrises fell.

Her heart sank when Julia told her that she had already given the box away to her dressmaker; but it seemed that she had another one tucked away like a squirrel. "It's first tier centre," she said, "so you'd better dress."

Claudia was indignant. "Do you mean to say that you'd have palmed off a second-tier box on us the first time?"

Julia didn't have that kind of a sense of humour. She explained, a little fussed, that she hadn't been certain of her own plans until the last minute.

"Oh, don't be silly," Claudia interrupted, feeling a little fussed in her turn. "I was only joking—Thanks loads, no matter where it is."

The next thing was to get in touch with Mrs. Ferris, whom David said would be waiting at the hotel until noon. He had neglected to say what hotel, but Claudia called the Waldorf, and was rewarded for her acumen by hearing Mrs. Ferris's cordial western voice floating fulsomely over the wire some minutes later. After the initial amenities, Claudia got down to business. She said, "I thought we'd all have dinner at home, and then—Biblovitch."

It was a shade cruel, but Biblovitch needed a build-up. She could sense a quality of uncertainty in Mrs. Ferris's silence, the while Mrs. Ferris scrambled about in her up-to-date Los Angeles mind trying to decide what Biblovitch was. Biblovitch might be a strong liqueur, Biblovitch might be a new vogue in games, Biblovitch might be—most plausible of all—the Theatre Guild's new play.

"Oh, delightful!" she accepted with pleasure. "You said Biblovitch?" she added, hopefully.

"Biblovitch," Claudia repeated without further elucidation. "And we'll dress, if it's convenient for you."

"Quite!" agreed Mrs. Ferris, who had no doubt, a trunkful of new evening gowns, all waiting to be worn.

"We'll dine at seven," Claudia went on. She didn't stress the hour too feverishly, as the later they reached the concert the better she would like it. She often thought that it would be a perfect arrangement to arrive just in time for the encores, which were usually short and easy on the ear, with the familiar quality of quotations. Not that she wasn't

musical—she had had eight long years of piano—it was simply that after a certain point, everything sounded alike.

She rang off with Mrs. Ferris's appreciation still ringing in her ears, and went in search of Bertha, who had just come in from the park with the baby. "When you go to call for Bobby at kindergarten," Claudia said, "we'll have to do some extra marketing, we're having company for dinner."

"Ach, that's nice," said Bertha, who sometimes worried because the Naughtons seemed to prefer their own society to anybody else.

"Monogrammed napkins, place plates and finger bowls," Claudia continued with a sigh. "Also demitasse." She had a notion that Mr. Ferris might welcome a plain home meal served with the efficient dispatch of bread on the table, and potatoes on the meat platter, and two vegetables passed at once, but now was no time to take chances. Stanley Ferris was another architect and a very successful one, so Claudia felt that as a good wife, she ought to put David's best foot forward.

"Perhaps we ought to ask Lisa to come over and serve," she suggested. Lisa had been a chambermaid-waitress for the Vanderlips before her marriage, and always loved to get back into the ring as it were.

Bertha shook her head. "Lisa doesn't feel so good, she is in bed all week."

"Oh, I'm sorry. For Lisa, I mean."

"But I can manage nicely," Bertha assured her. "I will clean the silver and wipe off the good dishes and make rolls, if you could maybe take the baby out, yah?"

"Yah," said Claudia. She glanced out of the window, and saw that the sun was shining. "Only doesn't it look like rain?"

Bertha peered out at the lovely day. "It rains surely," she agreed obligingly. "It don't hurt him for once," she added, in atonement to the God of babies. "So much air he gets all the time."

Company, added to a family of four not geared to chronic entertaining, invariably meant a lot of last-minute conflict regarding flowers, candles, chocolate peppermints and cocktails. Claudia found herself so busy that her grievance against David subsided into a dull ache at the back of her mind. It was not until she heard his key in the latch at halfpast six, that the enormity of his omission again swept over her. She kept on cold-creaming her face, and didn't even bother to go out to meet him.

She could hear him call her all the way down the hall. She could hear him at the kitchen door. "Is Mrs. Naughton out, Bertha?"

An instant later he was stalking into the bedroom, where, having swiftly wiped the cold cream off her face, she was slipping into her bathrobe.

"Hey," he said, and roughly pulled the robe from her shoulder, "what's the idea not answering me?"

"Why should I?" she queried coolly. ("When you can't even remember it's my birthday," she finished, silently.)

"What's been the matter with you all day, anyway?"

"Nothing's the matter with *me*," she replied, leaving the rest of the sentence unsaid. It occurred to her that when a woman was in a huff, the things she didn't say would make a long and complete conversation. David knew perfectly well that something was going on behind his back, but he couldn't seem to put his finger on it—Was she tired? Were

the children devils? Was it a nuisance to rustle up dinner at the last minute?

She told him, no. Indeed, she'd never felt less tired. The children had been adorable. And dinner was no bother at all; it was going to be just the sort of thing that people from Los Angeles would expect—clear soup, roast chicken, browned potatoes—

"Oh, shut up," David injected, rudely. "What the hell do I care what we have. What's biting you?"

"Nothing's biting me," she insisted off the top of her voice. "Nothing at all."

"Oh, go to blazes," he said.

She caught her breath sharply. This was too much. First he forgot her birthday, and now she should go to blazes. She turned away with the tears stinging her eyes, while he tore off his coat, and hung it in the closet.

"I'm not going to dress for this Cheese-Blintz tonight," he warned her.

"Don't show your ignorance. A cheese-blintz happens to be a pancake with cheese in, and the cellist's name happens to be Avram Biblovitch."

"It's all the same to me," said David. "I'm not dressing."

She stamped her foot. "You are dressing! The Ferrises are dressing, and I'm putting on my pink. They've seen it, but Carnegie Hall hasn't."

"That damn pink! All winter long I've had to get into a stiff shirt so as you can bring the overhead down on it!"

"It's the least you can do for me, heaven knows."

The enormity of the whole performance swept over him anew. "Whose idea was this blasted concert?"

"It was mine, and a damned good one—a lot of swank and no expense—I'd like to see you do better!"

"All right, it's your story, and you stick to it."

The quarrel was getting to the stage where it had ceased to make sense. "Just what do you mean by that brilliant remark, pray?" she inquired scathingly.

"Figure it out for yourself," he replied shortly, and vanished into the bathroom. A few moments later he reappeared, literally foaming at the mouth.

"Cold cream!" he gasped.

A gurgle of laughter broke through her lips. She knew at once what had happened—he had picked up her cold cream tube and used it for toothpaste. It was really frightfully funny, but it soon became evident that David found no silver lining of humour in the cloud of fragrant, oily substance that filled his mouth. Putting two and two together—his convulsive gesticulations and the smothered sounds that emerged from his throat in lieu of speech—Claudia soon gathered that he was blaming her for the entire incident.

"Can I help if it you're a fool and don't look what you're doing!" she flung at him, hiccoughing with mingled glee and indignation.

"You can help being a sloven and leaving things where they don't belong with the covers off them!" he shouted.

Her laughter vanished. Before she knew it, sobs were welling up in her chest, and drowning her in waves of misery. In an instant, David's arms were around her. "Why, darling, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she gulped. "I'm just miserable and you don't love me and is it my fault if you have to run and wash your teeth at this unearthly hour—"

"I do love you, you big chump," he denied hotly. "But why in hell can't you put—oh, well, skip it."

"You make a perfect fetish of putting covers back on things!" she cried. "I'd hate to think what a psychoanalyst would find in your subconscious!"

They might have begun the whole thing all over again if Bobby hadn't burst in at that moment. Claudia averted her head—Bobby had never seen her cry, and she didn't want to upset him.

"Who told you to enter without knocking!" David demanded.

Knocking had not been one of the major requirements in Bobby's short span of upbringing. "I don't have to knock," he announced.

"Oh, you don't?" David strode to his son's side, and firmly grasped the small arm. "Now march, young man."

Bobby hung back against a forceful expulsion to the hall. "I want to show you how I made my aeroplane!" he insisted shrilly.

"When you can act like a gentleman, Daddy will look at your aeroplane," said David, shutting the door upon him.

Claudia sniffled. "That's enough to give him a trauma!"

"Trauma, my eye," said David, only he didn't say "eye."

"You seem to forget," she reminded him, "that only this morning you were all over the place about that precious aeroplane. The aeroplane was more important than your wife."

He stared at her. They were back to where they started.

"Listen," he said slowly, "there are just two things I can think of that could be wrong with you—and you're too young for one of them, and I don't see how the other's possible, so I guess you're just plain crazy."

The tears started to flow again. "I guess I am crazy. Crazy to think that you ever really loved me, or had one speck of feeling for me—"

"My God," said David blankly. He shrugged. "All right, if it means so much to you, I'll dress."

She eyed him coldly. "You can go in shorts for all I care. And now, if you've left me any cold cream," she added, with hauteur, "I'll finish doing my face."

It was sheer irony that the Ferrises couldn't get over the spirit of happiness that seemed to pervade the Naughton household. They admired everything—the children, who had been bathed and slicked down by Bertha to wan, clean shadows of their real selves; the furnished apartment which was glorified by lamplight; and the extreme well-being of their youthful host and hostess, whose faces wore an unwonted flush that might easily have been mistaken for the glow of health.

"*What* a sweet little family," Mrs. Ferris commended, from the vantage point of forty and a son already out of college. "It's so refreshing to find a couple like you, in the midst of all the divorce and philandering that goes on everywhere. You seem so ideally suited to each other."

"Ideally," Claudia agreed, with a wooden smile. "David's simply the most attentive, considerate husband that ever lived."

For an instant David's face lighted up, and he looked quite complacent, as if, thought Claudia, kicking him sharply beneath the table, he actually believed it.

"This Biblovitch," Mrs. Ferris continued—"Oh, my dear," she broke off, "what delicious tarts!"

"It's Bertha's speciality."

"Excellent," said Mr. Ferris, who hadn't talked very much up to this point. "I'm not fond of pastry as a rule, but this is excellent. You ought to get the recipe, Duck."

Duck. It was a darling pet name, and probably fitted

Mrs. Ferris at one time very nicely. Do you think David would bother to call his wife a pet name? Oh, no. Yes. Once in a while, Skinnymalink. Or nit-wit.

Claudia brought her heavy thoughts back to the dinner table with difficulty. "You were saying what about Biblovitch?" she murmured, as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"I was saying," continued Mrs. Ferris, as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth either, "that it's always such a treat to hear an artist on his first appearance. Don't you think? And the 'cello—so much more body than the violin."

Claudia smiled. "So much more," she conceded. (Nice work, Mrs. Ferris. Rah, rah, rah, Los Angeles!)

"I'd never heard of the fellow," Stanley Ferris genially confessed. He turned a benevolent smile upon Claudia and his wife. "Leave it to the ladies," he said.

David was just about to top Mr. Ferris's remark, when he caught Claudia's eye. "I'll take a large cup of coffee," he said to Bertha instead.

"I'd like a large cup, too," Mr. Ferris concurred with alacrity.

Claudia could have wrung David's neck. He knew perfectly well that it was the sort of furnished apartment that boasted company dishes and kitchen dishes, and nothing in between. The demitasse cups, which probably belonged to somebody's grandmother, were egg-shell thin, with golden curlicues, while the coffee cups were thick and white, and couldn't fail to remind you of shaving mugs or other things, according to the way your mind worked. Indeed, they were so large, that it was almost nine o'clock before Mr. Ferris had drained with lingering enthusiasm, the last drop of Bertha's powerful brew.

"I'm afraid we'll have missed the first number," Mrs. Ferris said, regretfully.

"I'm afraid we will have," Claudia agreed, trying not to look too pleased about it. "Would you like to powder?" she queried, tactfully.

Mrs. Ferris hadn't thought of powdering, but once it was put in her head in those terms, she found it hard to fight down the suggestion. She seemed rather solidly put together, so it was fully twenty minutes later when they stepped into a waiting taxi.

For all of that, however, they arrived before intermission. The house was filled—literally filled—with lorgnettes in the boxes, and eyeglasses in the balconies. As for Mr. Biblovitch, he wore eyeglasses, too, and was dark and gloomy; completely without sex appeal, as far as Claudia was concerned. She yawned in the back of her throat, and gingerly turned the pages of her programme, making as little noise as possible. It was a large shiny programme, but its advertisements were all on the same subject, and soon palled in interest. She glanced at Mrs. Ferris's profile. Mrs. Ferris was determinedly listening to Mr. Biblovitch play Beethoven, and while she listened she was writing mental postal cards to half of Los Angeles. "*Having a perfectly lovely and stimulating time. Heard Biblovitch make his debut last night at Carnegie. . .*" Claudia glanced at Mr. Ferris. It was hard to tell what was going through his mind, but if he had been the sort of man to pare his nails, Claudia was positive that he would have been paring them at that moment.

Last of all, she glanced at David. He caught the glance and promptly returned it with a sly grimace calculated to rouse her to unseemly mirth. But there was no mirth within her. She felt only resentment and disillusion. A

fine birthday celebration, listening to a concert she didn't care two cents about, with people she didn't care another two cents about. She wondered what Mrs. Ferris would say if she could see behind the scenes of this so-called ideal marriage. For the first time, she found herself listening to the music. The slow, measured movement of Mr. Biblovitch's bow brought forth deep strains of crystallized melancholia that sank into her, and became at one with her unhappy thoughts. She sighed deeply, and felt musical. She was sorry when the strains died away. David touched her shoulder. "Wake up," he whispered. "It's intermission. I'm going out for a smoke with Stanley. Coming with?"

"Thank you, no."

Mrs. Ferris said that she preferred to wait in the box, too. "My slipper pinches," she confided. "And really, there's nothing in the world that's more uncomfortable."

Claudia said she thought so too. "I don't like it more than any pain I know of," she said.

Mrs. Ferris fell silent for an instant, trying to figure that one out. Then she gave it up and began anew. "A wonderful artist, isn't he?—Mr. Biblovitch. I'm glad your husband persuaded us against making it tomorrow evening, or we'd have lost the opportunity of hearing him. It was so sweet, the way he got around it—"

"Who?"

"Your husband, my dear. He said—but perhaps I oughtn't to tell you."

"Tell me what?" asked Claudia, repressing an impulse to request Mrs. Ferris to come to the point and get it over with.

"'Oh,' he said"—and here Mrs. Ferris gave a very coy

imitation of David—"he said, 'Oh, not tomorrow night, it's Claudia's birthday. We don't do much as a rule, but we might decide to run out to the farm at the last minute, you can't ever tell with us.' I thought it was so sweet. Simple. But sweet. As if your birthday really meant something to him—Why, my dear, what's the matter? Did I let the cat out of the bag?"

"Oh, no," Claudia stammered. "Not at all. What date is it tomorrow, do you know?"

"The tenth."

"Are you certain?"

Mrs. Ferris seemed to lose a little of her self-confidence. "Let me see, we left Los Angeles on the third—Yes, I'm *certain* it's the tenth tomorrow."

"Then what's today?"

Mrs. Ferris was not going to be heckled any further. She developed two chins, and said nothing. Claudia stooped to pick up one of the ticket stubs from the floor of the box. She looked at it, and then she looked at Mrs. Ferris. "Today's only the ninth," she whispered.

David and Mr. Ferris came trooping back an instant later.

"Darling . . ." Claudia breathed, as David moved past her to his seat. "Oh, darling. . . ."

He eyed her distrustfully. "What's up now?" he muttered.

"Nothing. I just love you. I adore you." She moved her chair closer to his, but he shifted quickly, fearful of having his shins kicked—for what, he didn't know. Claudia's heart melted with pity. What a beast she'd been. She was filled with contrition. She caught his hand, and carried it unashamedly to her cheek. "He's the darlingest, most

attentive husband in the world," she burst out to Mr. Ferris.

Mr. Ferris patted her shoulder. "You said that once before this evening," he reminded her with fatherly tolerance. "David, my boy, I have an idea your wife's in love with you."

David gave a sick smile. He didn't believe it for an instant.

He didn't believe it even after they got home. "You sweet fool," Claudia cried, just running over with a desire to hug him.

He backed away. "Let's go to bed," he said. "I'm tired."

Claudia said, "I'll go to bed, but I'm not tired. . . . Wasn't it a lovely concert? Especially the second half? And the Ferrises have beautiful souls, I adore them."

He squatted around to her. "Listen," he said, "just what's going on in that head of yours?"

"Only luff," Claudia assured him sunnily. "Pure luff."

David scowled. "You've been a she-devil since you woke up this morning," he informed her.

"That's because you were horrid to me. I've never been so mistreated in my life. First you used up all my expensive cold cream on your old teeth, and then you told me to go to blazes. But I forgive you. Kiss me."

He didn't kiss her. He grabbed her hands and held them pinioned, staring down into her face. "She-devil," he said again, this time in a whisper.

Somewhere a clock struck midnight. Without another word, he sat down on the bed, and pulled her down across his knee. Some of the slaps were quite hard, as if he

actually meant them, as if he were getting something out of his system. But on the whole, she rather liked it. She sighed ecstatically.

"There," he said, standing her on her feet again. "That'll learn you to be twenty-four." He took out his chequebook. She allowed him to make it out—a hundred dollars payable to Mrs. David Naughton.

He gave it to her. "For you," he stipulated. "But not for pots or pans or sheets."

She looked at him for a long moment in mingled impatience and disgust. Then she took the cheque, and tore it up in little pieces. "You idiot," she protested vehemently. "How many times do I have to tell you that I don't believe in birthdays!"

Five

IT NEVER FAILED—PEOPLE WHO BELIEVED IN BIRTHDAYS invariably believed in Christmas. Not that Claudia didn't believe in Christmas, as far as Christ was concerned. But she didn't think that He had anything to do with crowded stores, and suddenly polite elevator boys, and nervous wrecks. She didn't even think He would have liked the excitement and the to-do. She did think, however, that He'd have adored last Christmas on the farm. Snow had fallen during the night, and at dawn Louella's second calf had been born. She and David and her mother and Fritz and Bertha, had all gathered in the barn, and as they had started to walk back to the house across the lawn, Bertha had suddenly begun to sing Holy Night, and Fritz had taken it up in his rich thick voice. Before they knew it they were all singing. And it was less singing than some deep expression from within, like prayer. Claudia had felt the tears on her cheeks, but nobody had asked, "Why are you crying?" Because it wasn't crying, any more than it was singing. It was as if that same quality of prayer lay upon all of them, and it made Christmas the Holy Day that it really was. They hadn't even remembered the presents until hours later. . . .

This year it was all very different. In the first place, her mother wasn't there to enjoy it with them; and in the second place, Bobby had had his eyes opened in kindergarten, and had learned that Christmas was a superb racket in which

you received a large amount of loot varying from peppermint sticks to bicycles. Claudia was affronted. She said, "Absolutely no bicycle," and tried to explain to him the true significance of the day.

Her strange ideas didn't tally with any of the stories Bobby had heard, but he saw that she meant what she said about the bicycle. He compromised. He said, "Then can I have skates for Christmas?"

"May I?" Claudia corrected.

"May I have skates for Christmas?"

"No, dear," she told him, gently but firmly, "you're too little."

Bobby looked as if he'd been robbed. When he recovered from the shock he said, sullenly, desperately, "Butch is going to get skates for Christmas."

"Who's Butch?"

"Butch is my friend."

"His papa runs the cigar store on Third Avenue," Bertha interpolated, sotto voce.

Claudia felt a great rush of democracy to the front. Theoretically a boy called Butch might prove an excellent balance in a Park Avenue diet of Peters and Christophers, but it was hard to bring herself to a complete acceptance of this new friendship. "Is he a nice boy?" she queried tentatively.

Bertha drew her lips down and her shoulders up, in silent comment. "Show Mamma your nails," she said aloud.

Obediently Bobby extended his left hand. "Nah, nah, the other hand," Bertha commanded.

The right hand was slower in coming forth. Claudia met it halfway, and lifted it for inspection. She was agreeably surprised. Bertha was too much of a perfectionist.

"Show Mamma all your fingers," Bertha patiently prodded.

It was then that Claudia noticed the absence of the index finger. She unfurled it from its hiding place within his palm, and gave a small sound of amazement. This was, indeed, the *pièce de résistance* of his entire hand. Coal-black, and a quarter of an inch in length, it was truly a prince among nails.

"He doesn't let me cut it," Bertha anticipated her, with considerable agitation. "He doesn't let me touch it, even."

"It's almost as long as Butch's," Bobby proudly announced.

"I see," said Claudia. It was fairly obvious that the glorified growth served as a badge of eligibility to the restricted social circle adjacent to Third Avenue. It was even more obvious, after a little judicious questioning, that Bertha's conscientious supervision was a source of embarrassment to Bobby's chances of belonging.

"I'm too old for a nurse," he stated resentfully.

"But Bertha's Matthew's nurse," Claudia pointed out. "We couldn't very well expect Matthew to wheel himself around, could we?" she added in a bright, reasonable voice.

"Then if Bertha isn't my nurse, why do I have to go to the park with her?"

Claudia gave him the stark facts.

"You wouldn't like to get run over or kidnapped, would you?" she demanded.

"Butch goes to the park by himself, and he doesn't get run over or kidnapped.

"Butch is different."

"Why?"

She hesitated. This was ticklish ground. She didn't

want to make a capitalist out of Bobby, but on the other hand, she certainly didn't want to start up a communist. "We'll see what Daddy has to say," she evaded.

She told David about it as soon as he came home. "We have a problem," she greeted him. "Bobby."

"What's the matter, won't he swallow the cock-and-bull story about the little seed God planted?"

"I expect that'll come next. At the moment, he has a friend called Butch. He also wants to play out by himself and he wants a pair of skates for Christmas."

You'd have thought someone had left David a million dollars. "Let him go to it," he said.

"That's right," said Claudia, bitterly. "Complicate my life."

"It's his life."

"Don't be silly. I gave it to him."

"I had a modest contribution to make," he recalled to her.

She shrugged. "The usual necessary evil. The point is, where do we go from here?"

"Duck out of his way. He's growing up."

"He's too little to grow up."

"You're going to make a hell of a mother-in-law to some poor girl."

"I'm going to make a marvellous mother-in-law," she denied indignantly. "She'll thank me for taking care of her husband properly."

"Take care of your own husband. Charity begins at home."

"That comes perilously close to whimsey," she remarked, which effectively shut him up. He was scared to death of whimsey.

Two days before Christmas, Julia sent a carload of gifts with her chauffeur. They stood stacked in a corner of the living room waiting for the tree, and giving the whole house an air. Julia's packages were a creation, and made Claudia's conventional white tissue-paper offerings, stuck with red-cross seals and tied with narrow red ribbon, look like the dark ages. "The whole thing is that I either have no talent with Christmas, or too much," she mourned.

David mumbled something under his breath.

"For heaven's sake," said Claudia, "stop blaming Julia's operation for everything."

And then Roger Killian's presents arrived—all done up in a uniform colour scheme of mauve and brown and gold. "Roger just lost his appendix, didn't he?" she remembered reflectively.

David was devoted to his senior partner, and thought he was an inspired architect, but he said something to the effect that it took more than one appendix to make a man.

"Or more than one swallow to make a barn," added Claudia, sagely, to show that she caught on.

Roger's gifts were always very pure in heart, miniatures, and altarpieces, and an uncomfortably fine handkerchief for Bertha, and little things for the children that they would one day grow up to appreciate, intellectually. But Julia's gifts, for all their magnificent wrappings, had the virtue of being the sort of thing you wouldn't want to put away and give to somebody else next Christmas. Claudia could hardly refrain from opening the square box that was just small enough and heavy enough to taunt her imagination.

"It must be something very extra," she confided to David, as they put the finishing touches to the tree on Christmas Eve, "because it's for both of us. Would God strike me

dead do you think, if I took a peek?" David, who had really very little curiosity, said that God undoubtedly would.

Claudia called Bertha, and said beguilingly. "There's a nice big package for you from Miss Julia." She fished it out of the pile, and proffered it invitingly. Bertha flushed with gratitude. "Ach. That's luffly of Miss Julia. I open him tomorrow."

"Good old conventional Bertha," David approved.

"Oh, go on, be a sport, open him tonight," Claudia urged. "It's so big I can't imagine what it can be."

Bertha, weighing it speculatively in the palm of her hand, said she couldn't imagine, either.

"It's not handkerchiefs," Claudia tempted softly, "nor yet stockings, nor gloves, nor a purse . . ."

Bertha showed signs of acute conflict. David said, "Be careful, Bertha, she just wants to see if the Lord will strike you dead."

Bertha looked confused. Nevertheless, she found it humanly impossible to relinquish the package. "I open him," she decided with a little rush of courage.

She couldn't believe her eyes, as she lifted a soft, dark woolley mass from the layers of white tissue.

"A nurse's cape!" cried Claudia, "and a long blue veil! Oh, Bertha, how lovely!"

"Such wonderful material," Bertha breathed. "It wears forever!"

Claudia turned to David and picked up the square heavy package. "Here goes for us," she said.

Julia had certainly surpassed herself this Christmas—twelve stunning silver bread-and-butter plates. David eyed them sourly. "You can use your six for ash trays," Claudia told him. "Oh, Bertha, you're beautifull—" She broke off. "You look positively British!"

"She looks funny," said a voice from the doorway.

"What are you doing up out of bed at this hour, young man?" David sternly demanded.

"I heard paper rattling," said Bobby. "You're opening the presents," he added accusingly.

"Only Aunt Julia's presents," said Claudia. "Run back to bed like a good boy."

"I want to open my present, too, from Aunt Julia," he protested.

"Now see what you've done," said David.

"All right, so what have I done?" Claudia retorted. "We're opening Julia's presents tonight, and that's that." She found an oblong box that rattled. "A mechanical game," she hazarded.

Bobby reached for it. He held it to his ear. He jiggled it, just once. "Skates!"

Skates it was—shiny, whirring, ball-bearing skates. Bobby was in seventh heaven. Claudia turned on David. "You put Julia up to that!"

David denied that he had had anything to do with it. He said that if he had any pull with Julia, he'd have talked her out of giving him silver bread-and-butter plates. He said, with grim satisfaction, "It serves you right. Next time wait for Christmas morning."

There was no sense to it of course. As if the skates would have turned into something else overnight. But there was this to be said—it didn't help matters for Bobby to go to sleep with them clutched against his cheek. When Claudia attempted to release his hold, he tightened on them convulsively. David snorted. "A fine chance you'll have of getting those away from him, asleep or awake."

"I could kick Julia's tail," said Claudia, inaccurately.

She spent half of Christmas morning trying to sell her son a pair of boxing gloves and a tool chest, while David retired behind the newspaper smoking the new tobacco pipe Claudia had given him. He'd kissed her for it, a little perfunctorily, and she'd kissed him for the candy. "If it wasn't for putting on a show so that I could say, 'See what Daddy gave me'—and you could say, 'Look at what Mamma bought Papa'—we wouldn't have had to bother."

David was in full accord. "Some day," he said, "we'll educate the children out of all this nonsense." He threw his paper aside, and toppled her back over the arm of his chair into his lap. It wasn't the most comfortable position in the world for either of them. David said, "Ouch! Move a little." And Claudia said, "Your elbow's digging into me." But it was all the Christmas that they wanted, with the good smell of Bertha's dinner beginning to fill the air, and making them long for one o'clock. Even Bobby was perfectly happy, down on his hands and knees, pushing his skates along the hall, his mind off on some mysterious orgy of adventure.

"The people downstairs must like that," David commented.

"Maybe," Claudia murmured hopefully, "he thinks roller skates are just to roll."

But Bobby was merely biding his time. The issue presented itself when Bertha called him after dinner to get dressed to go to the park. He said, "I don't want to wear my galoshes because I can't skate with them on."

"You can't skate without them on, either," Claudia informed him.

"Yes, I can," Bobby insisted.

Claudia smiled pleasantly. "No, you can't, darling, because you mayn't have the skates until you're older," she replied, drawing her usual neat distinction between the verbs.

Bobby's lower lip trembled mutinously, and then he wept—deep, heart-broken sobs that filled her with remorse, "Shh," she whispered hurriedly. "A big boy like you. crying!"

"You said I wasn't a big boy," Bobby contended, feeling that if he had the name, he might as well have the game.

"Well, I was certainly right," said Claudia.

It was an impasse. She wished David would come back. He had a convenient way of locking himself up at crucial moments. "I'll tell you what," she suggested, "you can learn to use one skate, first."

Bobby brightened. "Then I can take one skate out today?"

"You may take one skate out today," Claudia graciously conceded.

It was as simple as that. Bobby ran to tell Bertha the good news, and in a little while, they all appeared at the living-room door, ready to go forth. Bertha wore her blue cape and flowing veil. The outfit did wonders for her. It did wonders for the baby, too.

"It makes him look like I played bridge and went away week-ends," Claudia said.

David said he knew just what she meant. He said, "It even makes me feel successful."

Bertha must have been pleased with herself, too, because she had her picture taken on the street with a donkey, to send to the farm to Fritz. Matthew was in the picture also, sitting up in his perambulator with his cap slipping over his eyes, unfortunately. But Bobby had refused to take part in the performance. Bertha recounted the incident

that evening with reproach. "Ach, he was notty boy. Yah, is the truth," she sadly reiterated. "On such a beautiful Christmas afternoon, with so many fine toys, he was quite a notty boy."

"Why, Bobby!" Claudia exclaimed, much grieved.

Bobby scowled. "She's not my nurse and she holds my hand."

"But be sensible, darling. Bertha only holds your hand when you cross the street."

"Tell Mamma the rest," Bertha suggested kindly.

"I want my other skate!" Bobby blurted out. "Butch skated on two skates today. Only girls use one skate."

Claudia took refuge in an ignominious postponement. "Daddy's gone to the corner for cigarettes," she said. "Run, take your bath, and we'll see what he says when he gets home."

She had hoped to have a few minutes with David alone in order to convince him that he must back her ultimatum with a stern parental authority. But Bobby came running the moment he heard the key in the lock, his bathrobe trailing behind him, and his one-piece pajama buttoned every which way.

"Bobby!" Claudia expostulated. "How many times have I told you to begin from the top, and work down?"

"You're a big boy now," David took up more specifically.

Bobby's small face, transparent and a little blanched from Bertha's thorough soaping, showed no abashment. He rectified the omission, and plunged immediately into business.

"Mother says I should ask you if I could skate on two skates."

David lit a cigarette. Bobby stood up on his toes, grabbed his father's arm, and blew out the match—the same

as he'd done ever since he was able to walk. Claudia tried to catch David's eye. Surely he must see that Bobby was only a baby.

David must have felt something of the same thing, for his lips softened into a little smile. "Thanks, old man," he said gravely. "How about coming with me while I wash up for dinner?"

Claudia knew an indescribable sense of isolation as she saw them depart together. Always, it was she who sat on the edge of the tub, while David snuffled his face into water and combed his hair. There, with the door closed against the world of household, this moment had come to be the sweet, intimate crowning of the day. Now Bobby had usurped her place, and it was she who waited outside, impatient, and a little lonely.

She sat on the bed, listening to the low sound of their voices. Then there was a scuffle, followed by a shrill peal of Bobby's laughter. Claudia thought, "It's nice when your husband and children are good friends."

They came out at last, Bobby said docilely, "Good night, Mother."

"Good night, darling."

"What happened about the skates?" she asked at supper, a few minutes later.

David selected a piece of cold chicken from the platter that Bertha held beside him. "Butch seems to be at the bottom of the whole thing."

"Certainly he is. I could have told you that. How did you handle it?"

"The only intelligent way. Bobby doesn't have to run around with a lot of Third Avenue hoodlums."

Bertha's lips closed in a gesture of decisive agreement.

Claudia waited until she had carried the platter back to the kitchen. "Look here, David," she said. "You're all wrong, taking an attitude like that. Just because a youngster's father runs a cigar store is no reason to call him a hoodlum."

"Can't your son find friends of his own social level in kindergarten?"

That was a funny one, when he'd fought like a steer, in the first place, against sending Bobby to a private kindergarten. "What's the matter with public school?" he had argued, being very of-the-people.

Now, at the risk of admitting that she'd been over zealous in the effort to give her child only the best, Claudia confessed what had long been on her conscience. "I wish you could see some of the little specimens of the rich," she told him. "They're practically all of them maladjusted. Bobby's one of the few who doesn't wiggle his nose, or have asthma, or stutter. He's just a full-blooded normal little boy who wants to go out on the street and skate. What's so wrong about that?"

David said, "Nothing. If that were the case. If he really was the full-blooded normal little boy you think he is. But he's not. He's got a streak of sissy in him."

Claudia brindled. And then she saw what he was doing. What a fool she'd been to fall for it. He was simply trying to manage her, trying to give her enough rope to hang herself. Well, two could play at the same game.

"When did you find out he had a streak of sissy?" she asked.

"In the bathroom. I showed him how to fight. He made a fist like a girl—thumb in."

"I've known that for a long while," she said quietly. "But I was hoping you wouldn't find it out."

"Known what?"

"That he was a little on the feminine side. Not the thumb, of course. But just general signs."

David put his fork down. "What do you mean, general signs?"

"Well, for one thing, he's not going to be any good at sports. That's why I was against skates—No more salad, dear!"

"I've had enough."

"You didn't eat very much."

"I've had enough," he repeated, with an edge to his voice.

She was sympathetic. "I know it's a shock when a man finds out his oldest son isn't as virile as he'd like to think. It's different with a woman, you see. A mother's spared a lot of worry when her son's the mental type. She doesn't have to be on pins and needles about him breaking his neck in football, or ski-ing down the wrong side of a mountain."

David opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again without saying anything. Claudia gloated. She'd tied his hands very neatly. Having just finished telling her that Bobby was a sissy, how could he tell her that he wasn't?

"Sure no more salad?" she queried.

"No!" he shouted.

"Well, you needn't yell at me," she answered, hurt.

Bertha brought in a chocolate pudding. "None for me," said David.

"Nice chocolate pudding," Claudia coaxed. "We had it for the children."

"You know I don't like desserts that wobble," he retorted, peevishly.

"Mr. David doesn't like desserts that wobble," Claudia relayed to Bertha.

"Tomorrow I make him a pie," Bertha promised.

The telephone bell rang. It was the wrong number. On the way from answering it, Claudia slipped into the nursery. Matthew was already asleep, but Bobby was awake. Claudia bent over him.

"What did Daddy say about the skates?" she whispered.

"He said to hold my horses and he'd fix everything," Bobby whispered back. "He said he'd fix it so you'd let me do it. Can I?"

Claudia hesitated. He was so eager, so confident. She knelt beside him, and gathered him to her. He suffered the embrace, waiting for her reply. Small need to worry about him being a sissy, Claudia thought, smiling into the darkness. His small well-knit body was the replica of David's—full of natural form and grace. David had only to swing a tennis racquet, and you knew that he was ninety per cent. male. He had only to slip one arm through the water, and you knew that he could swim, effortlessly, with long clean strokes. Somehow, it was easier to love a man who was good at sports. It took a lot of understanding to be proud of the spindly sort, who met the ocean inch by inch. She wasn't exactly devoted to cold water herself, but she could swim and ride and play tennis as well if not better than the average woman.

Bobby grew restive in her embrace. "Can I?" he urged.

She looked down at him. With David and herself for parents, he ought to be a marvel.

"How'd you like to fix Daddy?" she asked.

Apparently Bobby didn't care who got fixed as long as he could skate. "How?" he fell in readily.

"I'll teach you how to skate, provided you don't say one word about it to your father. I'll tell him he can take you out next Sunday to show you, only by that time you'll have learned already—Do you get the idea?"

He nodded. "It's to be a surprise," he summed it up.

Stripped down to essentials, she supposed that's all it amounted to. There was more to it, of course, but it was not necessary at this point, to go into the subtler ramifications of sex antagonism.

"It's to be a surprise," she agreed. "So naturally you'll have to keep it a secret that I'm teaching you."

"Even from Bertha?"

"No. Only from Daddy."

"Daddy's easy to fool," said Bobby.

He could scarcely eat his lunch the next day for excitement. He brought out the other skate, which was still in the box, tied carefully in its wrappings of cellophane and gold.

"Don't throw the paper away," he cautioned Claudia, anxiously.

"Why? What do you want it for?"

"I like it," he said.

Her mouth went dry. "Because it's red?"

"I like the gold, too."

"You wouldn't want to tie it around your head or anything, would you?" she asked him, apprehensively. (Could David have meant what he said?)

She was relieved when Bobby laughed disdainfully. "I'm not a girl," he said.

They started for the park. "Couldn't we have Christmas oftener?" he suddenly propounded.

"Heaven forbid."

"Why?"

"It'd be an awful strain."

"What makes it a strain?"

"We work too hard over it."

"Well, couldn't we have it without working so hard over it?"

"I think you have something there, young man. But you know what I told you," she chided gently. "It shouldn't only mean presents, and having a good time."

"I know that."

"Then why do you want Christmas oftener?" she asked curiously.

"Because it makes you happy," said Bobby, with a great simplicity.

She fell silent, recalling the way she had felt last Christmas at the farm. She had touched something in that hour before dawn. She had not only touched something, but she had found and kept it through the months, feeling its richness often and anew. Perhaps Bobby had touched something in that feeling when he wanted Christmas oftener. Perhaps, in the red and gold wrappings of his skates, he found a symbol that was both tangible and satisfying. David's words came back to her: "Some day we'll educate the children out of all this nonsense." She thought, "We have to be awfully certain that we don't force them from what they really need."

The park looked like a walking toyshop: tricycles, scooters, diabolos, doll carriages. Bobby sat proudly on a bench, while Claudia knelt before him, and fastened to his oxfords the heavy shiny skates. She touched a wheel, and it whizzed around as if it would never stop, letting out a small, thick smell of oil. Nostalgia swept her.

"I was the champion skater on the block when I was a little girl," she told him, as she pulled one of the straps tight across his ankle.

"Girls aren't champeens," he stated flatly.

"I was," she affirmed. "Now, here's your skate key, put

it in your pocket and don't lose it." She gave him the flat, smooth piece of metal, and it was as if she were giving him the key to life. He clambered to his feet. Vicariously, she tasted the first thrill of standing on potential wings.

But Bobby didn't stand very long. It was a shock to both of them. "They're slippery," he discovered, grievedly.

"Naturally," she retorted curtly. "What did you expect?"

He pushed her away. "I can do it alone—let me . . ."

"Hold on to the bench."

He held on to the bench. As his legs slid from under him, the edge of the bench hit him on the chin. There was blood. Claudia's bones turned to water. She was always a fool when it came to blood and the children.

Bertha, who had followed up with Matthew in the carriage, moved quickly to the scene. She was capable, and assuring. "Nothing at all. His tooth cut his lip." She smiled broadly. "Come. Let Bertha see you skate."

Claudia grabbed his arm just in time. He floundered along, one leg here, one leg there. Then he was on his knees. Claudia yanked him up. "For goodness' sake," she said.

A man with a cane turned aimlessly. He looked yellow, and as if he didn't feel like smiling, but he had to smile.

"I'm doing good," gasped Bobby, slithering along.

Claudia gritted her teeth. "I'm glad you think so. You're like a crab doing the schottische." She felt a little sick. Suppose David really hadn't been joking about that streak of sissy? "Make a fist," she shot at him.

He seemed a little confused, but he didn't want to bite the hand that held him at this juncture, so he did as he was told. She studied the small rosette of flesh and knuckle with narrowed eyes. As fists went, it looked all right to

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her, but she couldn't for the life of her remember whether David had said the thumb ought to be in or out. "Come along," she said curtly. "See if you can keep your legs under you."

Bertha took pity on her after the second round. "Better you rest," she suggested. "It's foolishness. He should be anyway nine or ten to skate."

"Oh, I can do it, I'm old enough!" Bobby put in with a supreme and misguided confidence. "Watch me—"

He started off, and landed flat. Claudia rushed to his rescue and hoisted him up. She thought every bone in his body must be broken, but amazingly, he was intact.

A little boy with a pale triangle of a face approached. "Are you learning to skate?" he inquired in a high sweet voice. He turned to Claudia. "We're in each other's class in kindergarten," he explained politely. "My father gave me a pony for Christmas. It's up in the country."

"How lovely. What's your name?" asked Claudia.

"Anthony. Anthony Brooks Ellsworth."

"How old are you, Anthony Brooks Ellsworth?"

"I'm seven."

Claudia couldn't help being pleased. She said to Bertha in an undertone, "He's older than Bobby and a good head shorter, and no colour."

"Oh, sure," said Bertha, largely. "Bobby's very big for his age."

Claudia turned to her son. "We'll try again," she said, feeling more kindly toward him.

This time it went a little better. He achieved a half-dozen strokes without lifting his feet, but without falling down either. "Have you got skates?" he threw over his shoulder to Anthony Brooks Ellsworth.

"I told you, I have a pony," Anthony replied, aloofly.

Bobby was unimpressed. "We have a cow. Two cows," he tossed out.

Anthony followed alongside, in verbal competition. He gave Bobby a swimming pool, and Bobby gave him back a brook. Anthony put up two cocker spaniels, against which Bobby produced two great Danes and a Persian cat.

"We have a great big greenhouse," Anthony said.

Bobby smiled. "We have pigs," he mentioned casually.

Anthony was stumped. "We have tennis courts," he managed finally.

Bobby was swift to feel his advantage. "Have you got sheep and geese and chickens and ducks?" he pursued with the relentless punches of a boxing bout.

Anthony's steps faltered. "My governess wants me," he said. "I have to go . . ."

"Good-bye, and thank you!" Claudia called back blithely. The conversation to which she had just listened had not been on a very high spiritual plane, but it had served to divert Bobby's mind so completely that without realizing it, he'd been skating alone for quite some time. She felt a ray of hope stir within her. She thought of all the little moppets in the newsreels who won diving cups, and she was more than ever confident that Bobby could prove a shining light on skates. "Twice more around," she ordered gaily.

For a wonder, Bobby only giggled that evening when his father spoke of taking him out on Sunday. Claudia saw David shake his head in warning. It was perfectly clear that she wasn't supposed to know that she'd been managed into giving her consent. "We're so involved it's going to take a certified public accountant to get us straightened out," she thought.

Unfortunately, it was she who almost gave the whole thing away the next morning. "Ouch!" she cried as she swung out of bed.

"What's the matter?" David quickly asked.

"I'm crippled." She hobbled a few steps and tried to straighten up.

"Listen, are you going to turn into a wife with a bad back?" he demanded disgustedly, to show he wasn't alarmed.

"Maybe."

"You hop yourself to the doctor."

"Oh, don't be silly, it's only Charleyhorse."

"Charleyhorse from what?"

"I was bending over yesterday," she said, with a mild degree of truth.

He lifted her back to the bed. "Show me where it hurts."

"Here."

"That's your coccyx," said David, who always knew the correct name for things. "Better watch that it doesn't kick up on you."

He telephoned from the office at ten. "How's the back?"

"You mean my coccyx," she corrected him importantly. "It's elegant."

At noon he telephoned again. "How's the coccyx?"

"Oh. My back, you mean? It bothers me a little, but I'll live."

"He certainly loves me," she thought happily as she hung up. No wonder a lot of women always had something the matter with them—it was one way of keeping your husband wound around your finger. "No, thank you very much," she said aloud. It was good to be young and happy and alive. It was good to know that your husband loved you,

sick or well. "Just the same," she decided, sensibly, "I'd better get myself a bottle of liniment after I finish with Bobby this afternoon."

Bobby, however, amazed her. He fell only three times, and was able to get up by himself without tumbling down again. "He does wonderful!" cried Bertha, flushed with pride.

"Wait till Butch sees me," Bobby exulted.

"Where is Butch by the way?" Claudia asked with interest.

"Public School doesn't let out until after three," said Bertha.

It wasn't until Saturday that Claudia made Butch's acquaintance.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Butch," she said, gazing into dark fringed eyes. "Bobby tells me you're his best friend."

"He skates good now," Butch acknowledged obliquely, with a trace of grudging pride.

"How old are you, Butch?"

"Five."

This was a distinct shock. He was younger than Bobby, but he was almost a head taller, and much heavier in build.

"I only got wooden wheel skates for Christmas," Butch went on generously, without resentment. "It's much harder to skate on ball bearings, they're much slipperier."

Claudia could feel herself swell up with a deep gratification. She forgave Butch his size. Here indeed, was first-hand praise, praise that really meant something.

With Butch out of the running on wooden wheels, Bobby was the skating wonder of the park. He could skate backwards and forwards with equal ease, he could stop short in full speed, he could turn with horizontal grace. The man with the yellow complexion and the cane stopped to

comment. "Amazing the way he's picked it up," he remarked in a pleasant melancholy voice.

"Oh, thank you. . . ."

"He's no end plucky," the man said, and moved on without tipping his hat.

"He's English," Claudia concluded. "And he's either ill, or writes."

On Saturday evening, Bertha shrewdly polished off the skates so that they looked like new. "Mr. David shouldn't see that we've been practising," she said.

Bobby hugged himself in glee. Claudia thought, "What if it rains?" They were all acting a little like silly fools.

Sunday dawned clear and bright and cold. At first David pretended to have forgotten his promise. "I have to go down to the office, son—Sorry. Next Sunday, maybe."

Bobby's face fell. "Daddy's being whimsical again," Claudia said. "Go on, get ready." At the last minute, she decided airily, "I think I'll go along."

"All right," said David.

("All right, indeed. As if I'd miss it!")

They started out, the three of them, with the skates clinking from Bobby's arm. "I know he's much too little to even stand up on them," Claudia protested. "I was almost ten before I was allowed to begin."

"I was pretty nearly that myself," said David, sheepishly.

When they reached the park, he showed his son how to put the skates on, and then helped him to his feet.

"Oh, be careful!" Claudia implored, as weak with giggling, Bobby achieved a realistic tumble. She reached a hand to steady him.

"Let him alone," David brusquely ordered.

"And have him break his neck?"

"I won't break my neck," said Bobby, quivering.

"Very well," said Claudia. "Don't say I haven't warned you."

Carefully, exaggeratedly, she removed her hold. And then he was off. It was all she could do not to throw her hat in the air, for he was even better than she'd dared hope—so smooth, so gliding, so utterly competent for his age. Her eyes sought David's face. Odd. He just stood there watching, not saying anything—just watching like a person who watches something. She caught his arm, and shook him. He turned and looked down at her. "The boy's doing all right," he assured her. "He can handle himself you don't have to worry about him."

Her jaw hung open. What was he trying to do—steal her thunder, turn the tables on her? But no. He was guiltless, for once, of any such intention. He was taking it all for granted. Bobby was neither better nor worse than his father had expected him to be. Red waves of helpless fury overwhelmed her. "I thought you said he was a sissy!" she accused him, hotly.

His smile was smug. "No son of mine's a sissy. I was goading you."

Words choked in her throat. He saw by her face that something was upsetting her. "What's the matter?" he asked.

There was so much the matter that she couldn't speak; she couldn't express her contempt for his unmitigated impudence and vanity.

"What's the matter?" he repeated, this time with a trace of anxiety. ("I must look like I'm going to get a stroke," she thought.)

Bobby came skating up. "How was I?" he panted.

"You were fine," said David, encouragingly. "Go on, skate around some more."

"Watch me skate backwards!" Bobby shouted.

"That's fine," said David again, with his mind on Claudia. He looked down at her, worried. "Don't you feel well?"

She did it deliberately, in cold blood. He deserved it. "It's my coccyx," she whispered.

He picked her up, right there in the park, and lifted her to a bench. She let him do it. She even let him call a taxi.

She didn't bargain for his going further than that, however. Without asking any questions, he dropped Bobby off at the apartment, and drove on to Dr. Mack's on the corner.

"You're crazy!" Claudia sputtered.

"March," he said, and pushed her in to the small square waiting room which smelled of new furniture and paint. There wasn't anybody waiting, but Dr. Mack kept moving around behind the closed door of his office, clearing his throat as if he were several people.

"Do you think he'd had any patients since Matthew's convulsion?" Claudia whispered.

"Being a young doctor's tough going," said David.

"Being a young anything is tough going," said Claudia.

The door opened at last, and Dr. Mack stood on the threshold, very tidy and businesslike in his white coat. He gave one last clearing of his throat, and said, "Come in, come in."

"There's nothing the matter with me," Claudia confessed at once.

"Hush, your mouth," said David. "She's been complaining of a pain in her back, Doctor. I wish you'd go over her."

Dr. Mack immediately thought of kidneys, and took her history in the smallest living handwriting. He even took her mother's history, and said 'Herumph,' when he heard

what she had died of. He pondered Matthew's recent illness in the light of this information, and paced to the window, staring out, while Claudia slipped off her dress behind a screen. "This is the damndest trick," she shivered to David in a furious sotto voice. "I'll get even with you."

She didn't dream that there was anything the matter with her. But there was.

"Hal" Dr. Mack discovered after punching her kidneys to no effect. "We've got a pretty nasty condition here of a pulled muscle. Pulled muscles can be very nasty."

"Really!" cried Claudia, agreeably surprised.

"It must have been causing you quite some pain," he continued, as he wound her lavishly in adhesive tape.

Claudia was silent. Pulled muscles didn't bother her, but pulled adhesive tape would, when the time came to unstrap her.

"Come back on Wednesday," he ordered, "and in the meantime, keep off your feet as much as possible."

"I'll see that she does," David put in, masterfully. He helped her into her coat, and his touch made her feel as if she were a fragile china cup. It was pleasant, for a change. "Does it hurt much?" he asked her, with a lot of muted tenderness in his voice.

She had to be honest. "It itches more than it hurts."

Nevertheless, he seemed upset. "I wonder how you happened to strain yourself like that," he mused.

She started to tell him that no human back could have gone through what she'd gone through with Bobby this past week, and then she suddenly changed her mind. It was much kinder not to disillusion him. "I think I must have snapped something while I was trimming the Christmas tree," she said.

"That's just what did it," David decided.

She smiled to herself. She was almost certain that Christ wouldn't have minded the lie. He mightn't even have called it a lie. He'd have probably recognized it for one of those gentle deceptions that get woven into the intricate fabric of every happy marriage. For surely here could be no harm in letting a person's husband go on believing that his son was just a little more wonderful than he really was.

Six

CLAUDIA SAT UP IN BED AND SAID, "I'M STAGNATING."

David didn't say anything. He seemed to be sound asleep. Claudia glanced at her watch. Just three minutes before seven thirty. It wouldn't hurt him to wake up three minutes earlier. Besides, he'd soon be awake anyway, for she could hear Bobby's shrill voice in the kitchen, nagging Bertha for his breakfast. Not that Bobby was hungry—he hated breakfast, but he was at the age when he rose at six o'clock, importantly harried because he was going to be late for school. He probably inherited his urgency from David, who made a fetish of being early—or maybe it was just childhood, because Claudia could remember that she'd been the same way at Bobby's age.

At this stage of her life, however, six o'clock seemed like the middle of the night, and she adored breakfast. This morning, she sniffed with enthusiasm the rich dark fragrance of coffee, intertwined with the beautiful smell of Bobby's piece of bacon, frying to a curly crisp. "You have to eat one piece of bacon every morning," Bertha sternly ordained. "A piece of bacon a day keeps the doctor away."

It was really an apple that Bertha was talking about, but the theory was correct. Though if Hartley ate a strip of bacon every morning, it'd be the surest way to bring the doctor flying. Hartley's newest ailment was gall bladder. He was forbidden all fats and starches, and the last time he had come for dinner, it had been agony for him, as Bertha

was quite a fatty cook, in her own delicious way. It wasn't the sort of fat that floated around on top of things, but there was always enough of it to put soul into what she made.

Fritz had killed a goose for Christmas and had sent it down to them, and Bertha had been terribly happy because it was such a fat goose. She had rendered (Claudia could never be sure whether it was rended or rendered) almost a quart of it, and she kept it in a tightly sealed glass jar in the ice box. She used it jealously, scooping out a meagre spoonful now and again for Matthew's chest, or for her more important pastries. She said that there was nothing in the world like goose fat for colds and for shortening. The night Hartley came for dinner with the Dexters, he ate two pieces of Bertha's plum cake, although Julia warned him it was poison for him. He said defiantly that he didn't care, but Julia reported afterwards that he collapsed with pain as soon as he got home.

Privately, Claudia didn't have a great deal of patience with people who had to be on diets. She wasn't a Christian Scientist, but she felt that a lot of Hartley's gall bladder was the stock market. David agreed that Hartley's trouble was largely in his head, but he wouldn't blame it on the stock market, fearing that Claudia would use it as a boomerang against himself. He said ten to one it was living with Julia that made Hartley's juices dry up, or whatever it was he didn't have enough of. This wasn't really as cruel to Julia as it sounded, it was simply that David seemed to feel that Claudia was the only woman alive that he could live with without murdering.

It was fortunate that she happened to feel the same way about him. Even looking at him while he was asleep didn't take the edge off of loving him. He slept becomingly

—his lips nearly together, and his manners quite as refined as if he were awake. Claudia felt that she couldn't bear being married to a man who jerked and made funny noises as soon as he became unconscious. She often wondered how she looked when she was asleep, but it was one of those things that you could never know—like seeing if the light was out when the ice box was shut, or hearing your own voice over the telephone. David told her that she slept with her mouth open like a fish, but she was sure she didn't.

Sitting up in bed this morning, she could see herself in the mirror above the bureau on the opposite side of the room. As always, it gave her a little shock to realize that she was lying next to a man who wasn't even a blood relation, and she thought how delightfully illegal marriage could be. Being perpetually immoral was probably the whole secret of a happy union, she decided, and wondered why more people didn't catch on to the idea. And then Bobby spoiled the illusion by tiptoeing to the door with heavy creaks, and whispering in a hoarse shout, "Is Daddy asleep?"

"If I was, I'm not," David roared, and reached out his arms like an octopus, swooping Bobby on to the bed and jumbling them all up together.

"You lunatic!" Claudia scolded. "Now look what you've done, you've made Bobby's nose bleed!"

Bobby was at once pleased and startled. He felt of his nose, and then gasped at the crimson stain upon his finger. He almost wept in self-pity, until David discovered it was only grape jelly. "Little boys are starving," he reprimanded severely, "and you waste good jelly on your nose—I smell coffee," he broke off. He swung his long legs out of bed, and pulled Claudia willy-nilly after him.

"I hate people who wake up all full of good humour," she told him. "It's positively vulgar."

"I'll be late for school," Bobby remembered, and scurried importantly from the room. He looked very well and happy, Claudia remarked to herself—as if his world were all in order.

"Divorce must be awful for children," she said, trailing after David to the bathroom.

"Raises hob with the division of the toys," he agreed. "Are you going to get out of here before I shave, or not?"

"Not."

"Then keep away from the washstand—And that's my toothbrush."

"Don't flatter yourself, I wasn't going to use it."

He snuffled into a basin of water and tumbled his face around in a towel.

"What'd you say, before?" he asked through it.

"Before when?" she replied through toothpaste.

"Just before. In bed. You were—what?"

"I wasn't anything."

"Yes you were. You said you were suffocating, or something."

She turned on him. "So you really weren't asleep after all. You just let me talk to the wind."

"Naturally I wasn't asleep after you woke me up."

"Why didn't you answer, then?"

"What was there to answer?"

"You could at least say 'yes' or 'no.' And I didn't say I was suffocating, I said I was stagnating."

"So?" David thrust the towel over a rack, and opened the medicine closet for his razor.

"Yes, so. We're almost ready to go back to the farm, and what have I done these three months in town?"

"What did you want to do?" he queried mildly.

"Any number of things. Look at Julia, how full her life is. Besides being in a lot of movements, she's in business."

"Don't make me laugh," David rudely interjected.

"The shop has her name on it, anyway," Claudia argued. 'And look at Helen Drew. She's had two divorces, and half a dozen affairs, and she's no older than I am."

"You wouldn't like affairs. You'd get too sleepy."

Claudia stiffened. "That's not funny."

"It's sad," he acknowledged.

Bertha knocked at the door. Her face was purple with excitement. She said, "Come quick! Matthew has at last two teeth!"

They ran as if the teeth would disappear before they got there. Matthew lay in his crib enchanted with the hubbub that surrounded him. "From now on he will have no more colds," Bertha ordained, like a priest. "He teeths hard," she added a little proudly.

"He's wonderful," breathed Claudia.

David said, "You fatuous females," and stalked from the room.

"Poseur!" she flung after him, for she knew perfectly well that he was as pleased about it as they were.

On the other hand, Matthew's teeth weren't the alpha and omega of David's whole life. But Claudia was beginning to realize that she had no other existence at all beyond the four walls of motherhood and domesticity. For weeks, a growing discontent had been shaping within her. She hadn't talked to David seriously about it, but when she'd wakened this morning, the full impact of an unimportant day had spread before her, and filled her with a kind of despair. "*I'm stagnating.*" David had been too sleepy to understand that she'd been in dead earnest about it. It was easy enough to be satisfied with her soul when she compared herself to parasites of the bridge table, but when she lined herself up alongside of women who functioned, she was

aware of her complete uselessness. Surely, with Bobby old enough to go to school, and Matthew off bottles and drinking from a cup, it was high time to attend to her own development.

Then too, the fact that Matthew had just cut his first two teeth was like an omen. Claudia believed in omens, although David had always said she made them up to suit her own ends. Therefore, she refrained from identifying the baby's dental achievement with any Superior Intervention, and simply said, as David was shrugging into his overcoat in the hall, "You wouldn't mind awfully, would you, if I started to get busy today on a job?"

"What job?" he asked.

"The job I'm going to find."

"Oh," said David. "No, go right ahead."

"You think I can't," she challenged him. "You think all I am is somebody you can call out to when you come in nights, and say, 'I'm home!'"

"Well," David admitted, "I wouldn't know of anyone else I'd rather call to."

"I'll have a phonograph record made."

"Look," he said, "I'm late. Anyway, we'll be back at the farm before you know it."

"And then I can keep busy weeding, I suppose."

"Or join the garden club."

She stamped her foot. "David, treat me like a human being, *please!* Is there any law against my taking the train in with you every day? Or furnishing a little apartment in town and only going up weekends?"

"No law, but no money, either. We can't afford two establishments indefinitely."

"I'll be contributing."

"Oh," he said, on a long breath of enlightenment, "why

doesn't somebody tell me these things?" He dropped a kiss that landed on her nose. "So long, darling. See you tonight." He saw her watching him from the door, and started bowlegged down the hall to the elevator. He was funny, but she was in no mood to laugh at him.

"Man's chattel," she muttered.

• "Man's what?" he called back with his finger on the bell.

"Chattel," she repeated in stony-faced antagonism.

She should have known better, because when he telephoned at noon, he said, "Is Mrs. Chattel to house?"

"No," Claudia replied. "Mrs. Chattel doesn't live here any more."

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Chattel would have already been on her way, if Mrs. Chattel hadn't happened to have developed a stomach-ache, of all things. It had come upon her out of a perfectly clear sky just as she was going over her clothes, trying to make up her mind whether to wear her old tweed suit or her new ensemble. The ensemble had a lot of Persian Lamb on it—it was an original model reduced to a third of its cost in an after-holiday sale—and although it was good psychology to look successful when you went after a job, still, you had to have something to look successful about, so she decided in favour of the tweed.

She carried it to the kitchen. "Bertha, be an angel, there's a little tiny spot on the skirt, and maybe one on the jacket."

Bertha was wonderful at getting spots out. When she brought the suit back a short while later, it might have come from the hands of a tailor. But Claudia was no longer interested in it. She was huddled on the bed.

"Is something wrong?" Bertha asked, alarmed.

"The funniest pain."

Bertha's large hand descended with amazing gentleness to a designated point beneath Claudia's diaphragm.

"No, not there, here . . ." Claudia wavered, perplexed. "A little further over. . . . It's nothing, though. I must have had too much bacon this morning."

"That is nonsense," Bertha refuted. "Your appetite is always very good."

"I know it is." She couldn't help feeling a little embarrassed that she, of all people, should be hors de combat from something that she'd eaten. She couldn't believe it to be true—it was probably only mental. She hoped she wasn't going to be in for one of those spastic conditions for which you swallowed pills after meals, but went to art school on the side, to take up your extra slack. Roger had a spastic condition, and so did Edith Dexter. Edith was much better, however, since her understanding with Phil, while Roger, who was being psychoanalyzed, found that when he watched his Reactions he didn't have attacks.

"All that's the matter with me," thought Claudia, "is that I let myself get stewed up over stagnating. What I need is to get out of this rut I'm in, and begin to live. Really live." Of one thing she was certain. If she didn't find herself a dignified, constructive job, she'd end up like a lot of other ambitious housewives—painting cabbages or sculpturing odds and ends of people's bodies.

"Let me help you to undress and get under the covers," Bertha broke in upon her thoughts.

"That's ridiculous," Claudia scoffed. "I'm going out in a few minutes." Her voice thinned off, as if breath were suddenly at a premium against the strange discordancy that pressed into her. She was aware of Bertha lingering for a moment, and then tiptoeing from the room. She tiptoed back a little while later. Claudia opened her eyes. She

saw that Bertha carried a tray, and on the tray there was a cup of tea and a poached egg.

"What's the idea?"

"I give you only a very light lunch," Bertha stipulated.

"Lunch?" Claudia echoed incredulously. "Why I just ate breakfast!"

"Oh no, it is already half past twelve. I leave now to call for Bobby."

"That's impossible."

"You slept," Bertha informed her, much gratified.

Claudia was affronted. "I never sleep in the daytime."

The telephone bell rang. Claudia reached for it. That was when David said, "Is Mrs. Chattel to house?" It didn't occur to her to tell him she wasn't feeling well, because in the first place, he always got very upset over the least little thing that bothered her, and in the second place, a stomach-ache was nothing to brag about.

The poached egg turned out to be a great mistake, for by the time Bertha came home with Bobby, she was huddled again into a crescent of discomfort. She heard Bobby call out to her as he came in the front door—the image of David. But when she tried to answer him, her voice broke in a bleat.

"Mother!" he kept calling on an importunate crescendo. "Mother, are you home!"

"Mamma don't feel so good," Bertha explained gently on the threshold of the room, and Claudia was aware of his startled and resentful frown. "Wash now your hands, lovey, and for your lunch I have a nice lamb chop," Bertha cajoled.

Claudia winced. The mere mention of food was a trigger to the vast unhappiness within her physical being. She was glad she was grown-up. If she were in Bobby's shoes, she'd probably be in for a dose of castor oil, which Bertha

would sandwich slyly between layers of sarsaparilla. "Come now," she would purr with a false smile. "Sarsaparilla is a nice drink, swallow it all down. . . ."

Claudia shuddered violently. "Oh God, if you let me get all right before I have to take castor oil I'll never eat any more bacon as long as I live, and I'll never make fun of people on diets or with spastic conditions, amen."

God must have been trying to teach her a lesson, because she was far from all right by the time David came home. Nevertheless, she made the effort to appear as usual. But she couldn't fool him. The minute he noticed that she couldn't eat, he knew that something was wrong. He tossed his napkin aside, rose from the table, and felt her forehead. He was half in fun, but Bertha had to put her two cents in, and said, portentously, "All day she was in bed, Mr. David. I think you should know."

"I wasn't *in* bed, I was on the bed!" She rose a little dizzily. "And if you don't mind," she continued with as much dignity and as little haste as she could manage, "I think I'll go back there."

David insisted on taking off her shoes and stockings, which she hated. "Shut-up," he ordered, and slapped her hands down.

Bobby hovered in the doorway, as upset as David. "Is mother sick?"

"Certainly I'm not sick," Claudia assured him. "Your father's just being officious."

But it was good, nevertheless, to huddle down beneath the blankets. David eyed her sharply. Then he turned on his heel and started for the door. "Where are you going?" she called after him.

"None of your business," he replied. Claudia smiled. She liked him when he was in one of his "shut-up-none-of-

your-business" moods. It was the same thing as calling her pet names without passion.

She might have known what he was up to. In no time at all, Dr. Mack was standing before the bed. "My husband's an idiot!" she cried, glaring at David. "The pain's practically gone. And I'm not going to take castor oil. That's final."

Dr. Mack wore his usual air of importance, and slipped a thermometer between her lips.

"I haven't any fever, and the pain is gone," she informed him crisply.

"So the pain is gone," he repeated with raised brows. "And when did it go, Mrs. Naughton?"

"All of a sudden. I'm all right."

He sat down beside her, and ran his hand over her abdomen.

"All that's wrong with me, I ate too much bacon."

"Keep your tongue on the thermometer, please."

"It's in more than a minute."

David frowned at her. "You're hell," he said.

Dr. Mack removed the thermometer, and looked at it.

"How much?" Claudia asked inquisitively.

He acted as if he didn't hear. He said to David, "Where can I rinse this off?"

"In here," David told him. They disappeared into the bathroom.

She heard the door close behind them. After a little while, she opened her eyes to see Bertha standing on a chair inside the closet. "What are you doing up there?" Claudia asked.

"Ach!" cried Bertha, with her two chins shaking, "it's all right, I just get down the suitcase from the top shelf."

David walked in. He said, very casually, "Look darling,

let's hop over to the hospital. Dr. Mack thinks your appendix is acting up."

"Oh he does, does he? Well you tell Dr. Mack from me that he's a fool."

"He's not too much of a fool. I telephoned Dr. Rowland. He agrees that you should be moved at once. For observation."

"You'll move me nowhere," Claudia retorted mutinously. "Why I never heard of anything so asinine in my life!"

The doorbell rang. "We're going to lift you on a stretcher," David broke it to her gently. "There's a nice big car waiting for you downstairs."

She frowned. A lot seemed to have happened in a few minutes. Where was her mother? David mustn't frighten her mother. Her mother. Her mother was dead. No, that wasn't true. Her mother was smiling at her, and telling her that there was no such thing as death. She could see it for herself, all at once. The present, the past and the future were an inextricable One. It was quite simple, once you understood it. She told David about it. She said, "Why did I never realize that before?"

He said, "You're running a little fever, dear." His voice was very low and quiet. He didn't seem as panicky as when she'd got the crook in her back. David was like that—strong in an emergency. "Is this an emergency?" she queried.

"A little of a one. Now don't talk any more. Try and sleep."

"Where are we going? What are all those lights? . . ."

"We're driving through the park."

"Driving?"

"I told you it would be a nice quiet car."

"It's an ambulance, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Fancy me in an ambulance," she said.

The next thing she knew, a sharp point jabbed at her. She cried out, and opened her eyes. A man in a white coat was sticking a needle in her arm. He had a long face, like a banana. "Stop that!" she commanded.

"I'm just taking your blood count, Mrs. Naughton," he said soothingly.

"Who gave you permission to take it? Really. Sneaking up on a person who's asleep . . ."

David stepped forward, from nowhere. "It's all right, darling."

"Where am I now?"

"In the hospital."

All at once, Dr. Rowland was there too. Her mind worked with difficulty through layers of gauze. Behind the gauze there was a bright light, but it was hard to reach the light. If she could only think through to the light, everything would be clear. "Am I having a baby?" she asked very slowly, and very clearly.

"Not this time," Dr. Rowland assured her.

"Then what are you doing here?"

Dr. Rowland smiled in a cheerful way. "Oh, I thought I'd take out your appendix for a change," said he.

"I think you're mistaken," she informed him politely. She tried to tell him that she wasn't the sort of person to have an appendicitis. An appendicitis meant an operation and a lot of people died when they were operated on. She wasn't afraid of dying but she didn't want to leave David . . . or Bobby . . . or Matthew. . . . She wanted to go back to the farm with them, and smell the lilacs, and hear

the cock crow in the early morning. . . . "David!" she cried out. "Don't let them do it! David!"

"I'm here, darling . . ."

"I don't want an operation—I'd rather we spent the money on something else."

"But it's all over, dear."

Great weights seemed to hold down her lids. She raised them with difficulty. There were a lot of people in the room. No, there was only David, and somebody in white, who rustled. The world was made of pain.

"I hurt . . ." Claudia whimpered.

"The third day's always the hardest, Mrs. Naughton."

Claudia's eyes opened all the way. "Third day?"

"Yes, it's the third day, and you're doing very nicely." The person who rustled had turned into a nurse.

"Where did the other days go?" Claudia asked, bewildered.

"You slept a great deal of the time. Doctor's given you something to make you sleep."

"I didn't sleep," said Claudia. "I haven't closed my eyes." She wanted to weep. People thought she'd slept. Everything came back to her. She's been operated, and they hadn't given her enough ether. "I felt everything while I was on the table," she complained. Her voice trembled. "I tried to tell them that I could feel everything that they were doing. I shouted it at them, but no one paid any attention to me."

The nurse laughed. "Everybody thinks that," she said. "All you did was make the tiniest little sound as you were going under."

Claudia retired behind a hurt silence. She wasn't going to argue about it. "Where's my husband?"

"He was here this morning as usual, and he usually runs up around noontime."

"Not in the evenings?" Claudia demanded, more abused than ever.

"Oh yes, in the evenings, too."

"Does Julia know?"

"Who's Julia?"

"My sister-in-law."

"Oh yes. She came the night you were operated."

Claudia's lip quivered. "She should have sent me flowers."

"She did. A lot of flowers have come. But you've been much too sick to have them in the room."

"Really?" Claudia expanded with pride. A person had to be pretty sick if they couldn't have flowers. It was probably just the next step to getting them in wreaths.

"Why was I so sick?" she queried, trying to be modest about it. "Is everybody that has an appendix operation so sick?"

"Mercy me, no. Not unless it ruptures."

"Mine ruptured?" Claudia breathed on a long note of awe.

Shd could hardly wait for David to come. "David, did you know I had a ruptured appendix?"

"Did I know it? You blasted little fool, you damn near up and died on me." His face was all twisted up as he spoke. She saw suddenly that he had peeled off pounds of weight. "Oh, David," she whispered, "that would have been a dirty trick."

"You bet it would have been a dirty trick."

"It doesn't sound like me, does it?" she marvelled. "It just goes to show you."

"Show you what?"

"That anything can happen to anybody any time. You just have to be prepared. Thank goodness I'd straightened up my bureau drawers the day before."

"That was a blessing," David solemnly agreed.

Still she couldn't get over it. "I bet Bertha's been upset about this."

"Very."

"Was Philip Dexter upset?"

"He's telephoned the office every day."

She was pleased about that. "Who else was upset?"

"Everybody. Roosevelt ordered an hour of silence while you were on the table. Like Armistice Day."

"Oh, that was nice of him. When can I see my scar?"

"What scar?"

"From my operation, of course. After all, if you've got a scar, can't you show it off a little?"

"Only to me," said David.

Later, she knew that she'd had a bad week of it. "Right around the fifth day," the nurse told her, "you had us scared." Miss Haskell spoke with relish—she loved serious cases like double pneumonias and peritoneal infections.

"She's a thousand times better than the night nurse," Claudia confided to David.

David was surprised to hear it. "She'd drive me crazy," he said.

The whole thing was, Claudia reflected, that he'd never

been ill, thank heaven, and didn't realize how one's values changed from a sickbed. Considerate and loving as he was, he was nevertheless surrounded by an aura of robust well-being that imbued him with a quality of remoteness. When he left to go home in the evenings, it was as if he departed for a different world. In that world, Claudia knew that there was Bobby and Matthew and Bertha. She asked about them regularly—How many teeth did Matthew have now? Did Bobby come down with that cold he'd started? Was Bertha as marvellous as ever—But actually, her questions lacked the salt of true anxiety. Bertha and Bobby and Matthew were shadows outside the hospital world.

When they came to see her for the first time, they felt it no less than she. There was a little sign on the door: *No Visitors*, and Bertha's knock was timid. Her step across the room was timid, too. The floor creaked beneath her hardy weight. Bobby clung to her hand, staring at his mother as if she were a stranger, unable to bridge the invisible rift of illness that lay between them.

"You look wonderful," Bertha cried, not really meaning it, because there were tears in her voice. "Say something to your mamma, Bobby," she added in an undertone. .

"Hello," Bobby mumbled. He looked distraught and unhappy, and painfully well-dressed.

"Such beautiful flowers," Bertha approved, with a proud glance about the laden room. "Fritz sends his love. Every day he writes, how are you?"

"That's lovely of him," said Claudia. "Is everything all right, home? How's school, Bobby?"

Bobby cleared his throat to speak, but decided it was easier just to nod his head. "The cat has his tongue," Bertha explained apologetically.

Miss Haskell came hurrying in, "I think we've had enough for a first visit," she ordained in her brightly competent voice.

"Take home that basket of fruit, Bertha," Claudia urged. "And there's a box of fancy cakes I'll never eat."

Bobby revived a little at this turn of events. He said, "I'll carry the cakes. . . ." In a few moments, they were gone. Claudia felt exhausted.

"It's an effort," Miss Haskell sympathized, lowering the shade. "Now come, here's your medicine, and then we'll take a nice nap."

Claudia sighed with gratitude.

"She's a little tired," Miss Haskell was quick to forestall David that evening. "She had her first company."

"Then I'd better not stay long."

Claudia wanted to tell him that he needn't hurry away, but there wasn't very much to talk about—except that the woman in the next room was operated on for gastric ulcer. "She's not out of the anesthetic yet, poor thing."

"That's tough," said David, not feeling too dreadfully about it. He bent over her. "Well, I'll blow along now," he offered, as if he expected her to say, "No, stay."

But she didn't want him to stay. She was tired. She patted his cheek. "Good-bye, darling. . . ."

She was much stronger the second week.

"I don't feel so abused, and weepy," she told him.

He said, grinning a little, "That was the medicine you were taking."

"Oh was it? That's a relief. I couldn't imagine . . ."

Julia was her next visitor—looking very sleek and busy, as if she had just come from a committee meeting. For the first time in their years of knowing each other, Claudia felt as if they had a great deal in common. "Whatever you do," Julia cautioned, "Don't overtax yourself, it doesn't pay. I took it easy for months after my operation. Though of course, I had a much more severe time of it," she amended, preening a little. "I had practically everything removed."

"But you had no complications," Claudia mentioned.

"Anyway," said Julia, blowing a kiss in lieu of defending an untenable position, "behave yourself. I'll see you when you get home."

Home. Claudia hadn't thought of going home. "When can I?" she asked, when Miss Haskell brought in the luncheon tray.

"Dr. Rowland says in about ten days from now, if everything goes well." She broke a baked potato, and mashed a pat of butter into it. Claudia lifted a silver cover without enthusiasm. "Chicken again," she said listlessly.

"You ordered chicken. It's very good. It's the best thing they serve."

Claudia gave a slight shiver. She remembered back to the time when she'd thought that three trays a day, with anything you wanted to eat selected from a varied menu, would be close to heaven. But it wasn't. Food was no longer a delight, it was merely a necessity.

"The nurse tells me you're not eating properly," David chided her.

"The meals are awful."

David seemed surprised, "I ate here a couple of times.

and I thought the food was pretty good," he said.

There came a day when Claudia sat with her legs dangling over the side of the bed.

"Your wife was up," Miss Haskell reported to David. "She stood it very well."

"You ought to see my legs," Claudia boasted. "They're toothpicks."

"How far did you walk?" asked David.

"I just dangled," she elucidated coldly.

The next day she sat in a chair for fifteen minutes, and the day after that, she took a trip around the room.

"Tomorrow," Miss Haskell planned, "we'll be wheeled out to the sun parlour."

When David came that evening, he went even further. "Sunday I can take you home!" he cried, with exultance in his voice. "And Dr. Rowland says you won't even need a nurse!"

"Oh," said Claudia.

"'Oh'? What do you mean 'oh'? Aren't you happy?"

"Of course I'm happy." Secretly, she was the nearest thing to stage fright that she'd ever felt.

It was funny to leave the hospital without a baby. "You're the baby this time," said Miss Haskell, leading Claudia's arms into the sleeves of her one-piece wool dress.

"It seems funny to be in clothes, too," said Claudia.

"It seems pretty good, I should say," David put in. He looked as if he'd just had quintuplets, he couldn't get the beam off his face. Claudia wished that she could feel equally delighted. She had an all-gone feeling in the pit of her stomach, and her knees felt as if they were made of rubber. "You must get right into bed, and take a nap the

first thing you get home," Miss Haskell instructed. "You'll see to it, won't you, Mr. Naughton? After all, we've been pretty sick, and we don't want any relapses."

"I'll see to it," David promised. "The house is very quiet. Bobby won't even be there when we come, he's at his aunt's."

"I think that was a good idea," said Claudia. She was ashamed to confess the relief that flooded through her. Bobby was awfully good, but he was pretty obstreperous.

Miss Haskell did not go off duty, in a manner of speaking, until her patient rolled down the street in the taxi. "She's going on a mastoid case this afternoon," Claudia informed David. "But she said if I wanted her back—"

"Why should you want her back?" David interrupted. "You're well again, darling. . . ." His hand sought hers. It was warm, and firm, and big. But it spelled no security after Miss Haskell's brusque and knowing touch.

The taxi ride was bewildering. "I didn't realise there were so many tall buildings." Claudia marvelled. "And everything's gone on just the same."

"Not for me it hasn't," David said.

Bertha was waiting, with the door open, long before the elevator reached the fifth floor. "Ach!" she cried, in inarticulate welcome.

David picked Claudia up, and carried her into the bedroom. "Wait," Claudia exclaimed. "I see a lot of flowers in the living room!"

"Not now, later."

"Who sent them?"

"The Dexters. And Mrs. Van Doren."

"Who's she?"

"A client of mine."

"Oh, that was darling of her."

There were flowers in the bedroom, too. Roses. "Who sent those? They're simply gorgeous, what long stems!"

David grinned. "Your new night nurse."

"Extravagant—"

"In to bed, now," Bertha ordered.

"I think I'd like to walk into the nursery and see Matthew first," Claudia suddenly decided.

But David was obdurate. "I promised Miss Haskell," he said.

"Phooey to Miss Haskell, I feel wonderful."

Matthew was asleep. Claudia hung over the crib. "He's enormous!" she whispered. "He's grown twice his size."

She walked back to the bedroom, feeling stronger with every step. "What high ceilings," she said softly, glancing upwards.

"And three exposures," David added.

"It hardly seems like a furnished apartment, it seems like home."

"It was an awful lot of furnished apartment for the last month," David said. "And the double bed," he mentioned boldly, "was an awful lot of bed."

"It seems just right now," said Claudia, shyly, "not a bit too big." She sniffed. "What's that I smell?"

Bertha pulled up the blankets and deftly arranged the pillows. "Chicken," she said. "Fritz sent down chickens from the farm especially for today."

Claudia's tongue ran over her lips. "With rice or dumplings?"

"Dumplings," said Bertha.

"How long to wait?"

"Almost any minute. So soon Bobby comes, we eat."

The bell rang at that very moment; it rang and rang and rang. "Little devil," David muttered, "I told him he'd have to be quiet!"

Bertha, clucking, hurried to the door. Her hasty caution was too late. "Mother!" Bobby shouted jubilantly. "Mother! Are you home?"

"I'm home!" Claudia shouted back.

His steps sounded, fast and eager, up the hall. He stood at the door. His socks were tumbling down, and his hair was rumpled, but his world was safe. Claudia sat up in bed, and flung her arms out toward him. "Oh, this is living!" she thought.

Seven

CLAUDIA SAID, "I'M GOING DOWNTOWN TOMORROW. I haven't a stocking to my name."

She expected David to hit the ceiling. "You'll do nothing of the kind," she expected him to say, and in reply she was going to retort, "Would you like me to stay an invalid for the rest of my life?" You'd have thought, from the way he made her take it easy, that nobody else in the world had ever had an appendix out.

To her surprise, however, he merely looked up over his newspaper, and said, "Good, I wish you'd buy a book or a game for little Candy."

At first she didn't know what he was talking about. "A book or a game for little candy." It sounded like one of those trick sentences that are so much jibberish until punctuation focuses it into meaning. Hartley was full of them of late. All of a sudden, he'd take his fountain pen out of his pocket, and write down a string of words. Only last week he'd given Claudia this one: *What is is what is not is not*. "I give up," she'd said at once, for her mind always went blank when confronted with a riddle.

"Oh, come now," he'd encouraged her, "put your thinking cap on, two commas are all you need."

"Hartley, dear, *please*," Julia had protested, a little uncomfortably. She couldn't understand his sudden passion for collecting brain twisters, and chided him with being too

old to indulge in such infantile pursuits. But Claudia felt that it was just the opposite. Hartley was much too young to have aged so heartbreakingly. In the last months his hair had turned grey, and he puffed when he walked upstairs, and behaved in general like a doting grandfather with nothing to dote on. "Your brother's going through something," she remarked sagaciously to David, to which David replied, "It looks like the old boy's ready to sow a wild oak any day now."

"You don't mean a chorus girl like old men in musical comedies?"

"His gall bladder'll probably act up before he goes that far," said David.

Secretly, Claudia thought that a chorus girl would be wonderful for Hartley, but she didn't say so because she knew how she'd feel if David ever sprung anything like that. And yet she wondered whether Julia wouldn't be very slightly relieved if her husband got a new interest in life. Certainly it was no great stimulation to live with a walking conundrum.

For an instant, when David came out with "a game or a book for little candy," she'd thought that he was just pulling a Hartley, and that a comma or two would straighten it all out.

"Write it," she suggested. "Or spell it."

He said he didn't have to write or spell it; he said it was perfectly simple. Candy was short for Candace, and Candace had the measles.

"Oh," said Claudia, thinking volumes. When his own children had had the measles, had he done anything about it? No. He'd just said, measles were nothing. Even when Matthew had almost died, he hadn't bought him

anything. But Philip Dexter had called up every day, and had sent expensive toys. Now David wanted to send a little girl called Candace a game or a book. The implication was self-evident.

"Who," Claudia asked, slowly, and with a sense of doom closing in on her heart, "is this child?" She was hoping against hope that he might casually explain that the sweet old Polish woman who cleaned his offices had a sick youngster. Then all would be forgiven, and she'd love him more than ever for slighting his flesh and blood in favour of the underprivileged. But somehow the name of Candace didn't have an underprivileged ring to it, and when he added, "It's Candace Van Doren," it was a case of being worse and more of it. Moreover, "Candace Van Doren" didn't sound like an orphan, and Claudia knew, with an unerring instinct, that somewhere there was a mother of Candace lurking in the woodpile. It was perfectly true that David had never looked seriously at another woman in all their marriage, but at the same time, the symptom of buying somebody else's child a toy for measles, was about the most deadly symptom he could have broken out with.

"Who?" Claudia repeated with wooden lips, "are the Van Dorens?"

He didn't appear to notice that her heart had practically stopped beating.

"She's got that property up near us, and wants to build on it. I've got a set of plans drawn up for her."

Claudia swallowed hard. "I thought," she remarked, trying to make the words sound conversational rather than catty, "that you didn't want to be that kind of an architect. I thought you'd never take on a house unless you couldn't help it."

"That's right, but this happens to be one of the times I can't help it. Mrs. Van Doren's a cousin of Roger's, and I've inherited her, so to speak."

"You don't seem to be very unhappy about the legacy," Claudia observed, feeling a little sicker every minute. "What's her first name?"

"Elizabeth."

"Oh. You know her first name."

"What the hell do you think?" It was one of the "what-the-hells" that was entirely good-natured, but Claudia would have preferred him to be ill-tempered.

"Do you call her by it?" she asked, with a very thin crust of ice on her voice.

"No, when I want to talk to her, I say, 'Here, pussy, pussy—'"

She could have thrown the mantelpiece at him. "What's the matter with her husband buying toys for the child?" she requested, curtly.

"She hasn't any."

"Oh. Divorced."

It seemed to have at last gotten through to him that Claudia didn't like the setup. He threw his paper aside. "Look here," he said, "I told you about her. She's a widow. Her husband died about a year ago."

"You never mentioned her name to me," Claudia flatly denied.

"Nonsense. She even sent you flowers while you were in the hospital. And when you came home, too. She had them here to welcome you."

* "I remember those," said Claudia slowly. "But not the other ones." She couldn't help a slight feeling of com-

placency to think that she'd gotten so many flowers, she'd lost count of who had sent them. "We look like a florist shop outside," the night nurse used to say, "we go clear to the next door on either side."

~ If you wanted to split hairs about it, they hadn't all been *ona fide* expressions of personal affection—a number of them having been sent by Julia's relatives or David's clients—but they had certainly contributed to a general affect of popularity. Now that David mentioned it, Claudia remembered having received lilacs from someone she hadn't known from Adam. A month or two later, lilacs would have been as unremarkable as daisies in a summer field, but in the middle of winter, among the influx of ever-seasonal roses and carnations, they had evoked a little gasp of delight.

"I bet you twenty cents Roger Killian sent them" she'd said to the day nurse before the card had been brought to light. "Mr. Killan's my husband's partner, and artistic as all get out," she'd explained.

"You lose your twenty cents," Miss Haskell had returned, opening the small square envelope, and reading aloud. "It says, 'All wishes for a swift recovery. Faithfully, Elizabeth Van Doren.'"

"Never heard tell of the lady," Claudia had confessed. "I'll have to ask my sister-in-law or my husband who she is."

She hadn't had to ask. The first thing David had said that evening was, "Who sent the lilacs?" (Lilacs happened to be his favourite flower.)

"Somebody called Van Doren. She has a nice handwriting. Is she yours or Julia's?"

David had claimed the credit. "That was damn nice of her," he'd said, and when Mrs. Van Doren sent flowers in

celebration of Claudia's home-coming, he'd seemed—looking back upon it—unusually pleased at the gesture. Indeed, she now recalled that he'd gone into quite some detail about Mrs. Van Doren—something about her being a widow, and a relative of Roger's—but the combination had seemed so innocuous that Claudia had dismissed her as a nice old lady on the order of Julia's aunt from Boston. Little had she thought that David would be reciprocating a few short weeks later, by sending Candy a game for measles—and calling Mrs. Van Doren Elizabeth to boot.

She was dimly aware that he'd been saying something. "Hey," his voice broke in on her, "did you hear me?"

"I heard a lot of things," said Claudia. "I was thinking."

"I said, not to get anything too childish for her."

"For whom?—Oh. You mean Candy. How old is she?"

"She's only twelve, but she's brilliant for her age."

Claudia bit her lips. Never once in all his life had David ever said that his own children were brilliant. But she let it pass, while her mind did some mental arithmetic. If Candy were twelve, Mrs. Van Doren was probably well in her thirties. It might be that she was in her forties—if she'd started late. But it appeared, unfortunately, that Mrs. Van Doren had started early—a year earlier than Claudia, in fact.

"She was married when she was seventeen," David obligingly gave forth.

Again Claudia did some mental arithmetic. "Still, she must be thirty if she was at all decent," she amended primly.

"She's about my age," said David, who was going to be thirty-one next birthday. "She doesn't look it, though. You'd think Candy was her sister instead of her daughter."

Claudia had an innate distrust for mothers who looked like sisters. She strongly felt that after a certain age, mothers ought to look like mothers—the same as fathers. Hardly anyone ever said that a father looked like his son's brother; which was because men didn't go about with the equivalent of a headful of juvenile curls, and skirts up to their knees. It was perfectly true that Claudia herself was often mistaken for a schoolgirl, but she'd always regarded it as a misfortune, rather than an effect to be striven for. "Don't tell me you're a married woman," people would exclaim incredulously, and if David happened to be around, he'd volunteer the information that he'd robbed the cradle, and look very smug about it.

Now there was a similar note of satisfaction in his commentary on Mrs. Van Doren's excessive youthfulness. Claudia's brief, but entirely beautiful episode with Philip Dexter must have done wonders for her because she suddenly discovered that she had a great deal of intuitive knowledge about men. She might look as if she didn't know enough to come out of the rain, but actually she was as sophisticated as Helen Drew—who lived from one affair to the next—and she was almost certain that she knew more than Julia, who had probably never once wavered from the straight and narrow path, but liked to give the impression that she had either done so in the past or was in the process of doing so, or could do so at any moment.

At any rate, Claudia recognised that David was in a bad way. Moreover, he made no pretence of hiding his feelings; his confidence was wide-open and he was brimming with a desire to talk about Mrs. Van Doren. Claudia listened, with a cold, insensate rage tearing through her heart. Every word he said about her revealed the woman in her

true colours, but like a gullible boy, he averred enthusiastically that she was a thoroughbred, and had an excellent mind. "She's smart, and knows how to put on a show," Claudia inwardly re-evaluated.

Aloud she asked the question that was uppermost in her thoughts. She said, with careful nonchalance, "And is she pretty?"

David weighed it. "I wouldn't call her pretty exactly," he pronounced at last.

"She's more than pretty?" Claudia gave him rope.

David hanged himself, by nodding. "She's got a lot of character in her face," he said.

"And I bet it's all bad," Claudia silently supplied. She rose to her feet, and walked unsteadily toward the door. It had happened at last. David had fallen in love with someone else.

"Coming back or going to bed?" he called after her.

She pretended not to hear. She couldn't trust herself to speak. She had not realised that so much hurt and jealousy resided within her being. She remembered how Edith Dexter had felt. At the time, she'd been so high and mighty, knowing only contempt for Edith's devouring possessiveness. Now the shoe was on the other foot, and the pinching was intolerable. Not that she doubted David any more than Edith had doubted Philip. She didn't even blame him, he was merely a victim of circumstances, for architecture probably had more propinquity than any other profession—except dentistry and certain branches of medicine. It was a great deal more dangerous too. A mouth full of cotton was not an ideal setup for romance, and except for taking blood pressure, most positions in a doctor's office were apt to be unflattering to a woman.

With an architect, however, you could always be at your best, and leaning over a set of plans fairly sizzled with possibilities. Would she ever forget some of those lovely intimate moments while she and David had been studying elevations, and where to put the nursery, and how many windows in the kitchen? Yet her common sense told her that he was no fool when it came to women; he knew all the tricks of perfumed hair and touching fingers. Even the wiles of the actress Victoria Manners had left him cold, which had given Claudia a lasting sense of security. Victoria had had practically everything, and had used it all, and still David hadn't given a hoot about her. "Maybe," thought Claudia miserably, "it takes a widow."

Bertha was turning down the blankets when she entered the bedroom. Bertha turned down blankets like a professional, and when she put out a nightgown, she took pains to arrange it to its best advantage. Claudia noted that the one that lay across the foot of the bed had an air about it, although it was only one of her old two-ninety-eights, with a rip at the shoulder mended by Bertha's diligent fingers. She had a number of fancy ones from her operation, and her good sense told her that now was the time to begin to wear them. But her pride rebelled. She wasn't going into competition for David's love. She looked neat but not gaudy when she went to bed, and that ought to be enough for him. He could consider himself fortunate that she had naturally curly hair, and didn't sprout out in curlers like an aluminium porcupine, which meant that she was always fit to look at immediately upon awakening. In fact, she was at her best in the early morning, with red cheeks and no bags under her eyes. It was fair to suppose that a thirty-year-old widow couldn't say the same, although she probably helped herself along with facials and permanents and

expensive bed jackets. One look behind the scenes, and David would discover that all is not gold that glitters. Claudia was certain, just by reading between the lines of what he hadn't said, that Mrs. Van Doren glittered.

"Bertha," she said, suddenly, "if I went near measles could I give them to Bobby and Matthew again?"

"Absolutely not," Bertha stated with authority. "But you could get them yourself," she added warningly, "and with grownups that isn't so good."

Claudia shook her head. "Measles with grownups is perfectly all right," she corrected. "It's mumps you're thinking of, with men."

She had full intentions of telling David that she was going to deliver Candy's gift in person the following day. "If Mrs. Van Doren's to be a neighbour of ours in the country," she would say, "I think it would be nice if I called on her." Then the whole affair would be above-board, and she wouldn't have the uncomfortable feeling that she was just following Edith's tactics.

But a funny thing happened; David suggested it first. He followed her into the bedroom, and rummaging through his pockets for his tobacco pouch, he said, "I think it would be nice if you dropped in to see Elizabeth. As long as she's going to build near us, you two girls might as well get to know each other."

Claudia turned slowly and stared at him—this was plainly a case of mind reading, in which case she had about as much privacy as a goldfish.

"I don't like being called 'you two girls,'" she remarked aloofly. "You sound like a fat man in a bad play. And I

certainly don't think it's intelligent to expose Bobby and Matthew to the measles."

"They couldn't get it twice."

"Who said so?"

"Elizabeth. Anyway, I've already been up there a couple of times with drawings and estimates."

"Oh," said Claudia, with her blood literally freezing in her veins.

"She made me stay for lunch today," he enlarged, oblivious of the falling temperature. "She's a magnificent cook. She had kidney stew, with a wine sauce."

Claudia's nose went up. She could never quite live down the idea that kidneys were really kidneys, though she sometimes tasted David's in a restaurant in order to be companionable. "It's a peculiar flavour," she'd demur, and David would reply, not at all helpfully, "That's the kidneys." If he'd ever had the wit to tell her it was the bay leaf, or the sage, or the sherry, she'd have overcome a great hurdle, and she'd have ordered kidney stew once a week at home, though Bertha shied clear of the idea, too. "Ach," she would say, "Better we have calf's liver." The silver lining to Bertha's calf's liver was always quantities of fried onions, so David had never actually objected to the substitution. Now that Mrs. Van Doren had put ideas in his head, however, he would undoubtedly feel that his domestic life left much to be desired. It was rapidly becoming evident that Mrs. Van Doren was a smart woman. If a man liked eels, she'd probably prostitute herself to the point of liking eels, too. But in one thing she had overstepped herself—she was utterly unethical in exposing another woman's children to measles by asking the children's father to lunch.

Briefly and without mincing words, Claudia gave David

to understand the way she felt about it. He looked at her, and said, "Don't be neurotic."

Neurotic. The word was like waving a red flag before a bull—or vice versa. Neurotic was the one thing she prided herself on not being. Tears blinded her. Her throat closed up. She bolted into the bathroom, and slamming the door behind her, turned the key in the lock.

She sank down on the edge of the tub, for she was aware that her legs had gone to jelly beneath her. She didn't have to find theatre stubs in his coat like a magazine story to know what was happening—what had already happened. He was no different from Hartley, or any other man. He was getting ready to sow a wild oat in the middle of their beautiful marriage. Well, she wouldn't stop him. There was plenty of iodine on the shelf. She'd rather swallow it than demean a love that had been so perfect.

She heard the doorknob rattle. "Claudia! What are you doing in there!"

She wanted to answer him, but her voice choked.

"Open up," he ordered, tersely, and then, before she could move, his command mounted to a crescendo of anger not unmingled with alarm. "Claudia!" he shouted, "if you don't open this door immediately, I'm going to break it down!"

Her lips set grimly. He had a guilty conscience, that was obvious. And anyway, how dared he use that tone to her? She remained seated on the edge of the tub in smarting silence until, abruptly, it dawned upon her that he 'was carrying out his threat; he was throwing his whole weight against the panel and it had commenced to belly inward. She hadn't imagined that he'd go that far. She'd better stop him, for it would be extremely anticlimatic if he

smashed a perfectly good door (for which they would have to reimburse the landlord) and found her merely sitting on the tub.

"Daddy!" she heard Bobby call out of a sound sleep, "what's that banging?"

She leaped to her feet. It was unthinkable that he should lose his temper to the point of arousing the whole household. She turned the key just in time—one more thrust of his body and the door would have caved in. She started to tell him what she thought of him, but he didn't give her a chance. He caught her arm in a grip that hurt, and shook her until her teeth chattered. "I ought to turn you over my knee," he ground out. There wasn't any love in the way he said it, and there wasn't any love in his face. His nostrils were waxy, and a little vein beat out in his forehead. Claudia had never seen him so angry before. She had never seen contempt in his eyes, either. He was uncanny. He must have known what was in her mind before she even knew it herself. She was ashamed, and because she was ashamed, she was afraid. "I fainted," she heard herself explain in an unsteady voice.

She was no less shocked than he. "You what?" he lashed at her.

"I—I fainted."

He picked her up, carried her across the room and deposited her, not too gently, on the bed. He lifted her wrist. David knew how to take a pulse.

"You lie," he said in a cold voice, and releasing her hand, walked out of the room and left her.

It was the first time in their marriage that they slept apart

through choice. Claudia carried sheets and blankets into a small extra room that adjoined the nursery. It was a dark court room, and Bertha used it for ironing and storing the perambulator. But there was a couch in it for emergency.

Bobby heard her moving about. She looked up to see him standing in the doorway, half-awake, and a little apprehensive. "Who's going to sleep in here?" he asked.

"You'll catch your death of cold!" she exclaimed. "You mustn't run around without your robe and slippers—"

Bobby's lips quivered. "I'm scared," he complained.

Then David was there. "Scared of what?" he demanded impatiently. "Get back to bed!"

Bobby said, "I'm thirsty. I want a glass of water."

David didn't argue with him. His nostrils still wore that waxlike look of fury. He started to propel Bobby down the hall. Bobby hung back. He said something fresh—something fresh because he was frightened and confused. Claudia knew it, but David didn't. He slapped Bobby's face. Claudia heard it all the way into the room, she heard Bobby's high, startled scream. Bobby had never been slapped before—oh, a half-serious whack on the rear, or a calculated rap across the fingers, but never in angry earnest, as David had just slapped him.

A moment later, he stood before her. "Get back to your room," he told her, in the same voice that he had used to Bobby.

She wasn't afraid of him any longer. "I hate you," she said. The words came from deep inside of her. They carried all the burden of her unhappy heart. David didn't say anything. For an instant there was the look of Bobby in his face—confused and helpless. Then it passed.

His eyes swept the cold, unfamiliar room, and the half-made bed. "You fool," he said in a hard voice.

She didn't try to answer him, she didn't even try to call him back. It was as if she really fainted, for all consciousness was lost in an overwhelming emptiness and despair. She and David were miles apart. She didn't know how it came to be, or when it had begun. It had started long before tonight, of that she was certain. They had not known about it, but it must have been stirring within them—some vast perplexity that defied the naming. Marriage suddenly ceased to be the union of two souls who could overcome all misunderstandings and all obstacles by the simple recipe of love. It became instead the complicated groping of a man and a woman toward an ultimate completion. .

"I don't know what it's all about," Claudia whispered, terrified. She crept beneath the chill, unwelcoming covers. She missed David's warm body. In the next room the low sound of Bobby's sobbing reached her, and somewhere Bertha moved about, full of troubled bewilderment. The house was filled with unrest.

David came to her toward dawn. He sat on the edge of the couch and tried to draw her to him. "Claudia," he said, "you're trembling. . . ."

She felt his contrition, the quick doubt that assailed him. She wanted him to believe that she had fainted in the bathroom, she wanted him to forget Elizabeth Van Doren, whose perfection grew with her own shortcomings.

"I don't feel well," she whimpered. And this time she spoke the truth, because her head throbbed and her heart was heavy and sick with an almost physical pain.

He carried her back, gently, to her own bed. "I'm sorry, dear. I'm sorry," he said.

She closed her eyes. She felt safe once more. She knew a way to keep him. She had discovered, finally, why so many wives enjoyed the necessity of illness.

In the morning, he insisted that Bertha bring her breakfast on a tray. "Watch her, Bertha," he said. "Keep her quiet, don't let her run around today." Claudia saw that he was remembering the nightmare of those long crucial days in the hospital. He was remembering old-lady tales that it took a long while to recover from an operation. Indeed, Claudia had met women who had made their operations last for years. But she wasn't that kind of a person. She was strong and well, and it was abhorrent to her to use the pretence of frailty to command devotion.

"David," she said, "I have to tell you something." She pulled him down beside her.

"I didn't faint last night. I was only sitting on the tub, being mad."

His eyes smiled, but his lips were grave. "Why were you mad?"

She wanted to say, "Because I don't want you to look at another woman as long as we both live," but she couldn't bring herself to the confession.

"Because I'm neurotic," she said instead.

His eyes stopped smiling. "I guess I am, too," he told her. He kissed her.

It was a strange kiss. She thought about it after he had gone. She could scarcely describe it. It held love, but it also held a quality of stillness. She wondered if marriages, like all other things, sometimes stood still. "That isn't good," she thought. "Nothing stands still for long. Things either move forward or backward."

Bertha found her dressing to go out. "Aber no," she firmly ordained.

"Aber yes," Claudia contradicted. "I'm going downtown for stockings."

In the end, Claudia was forced to telephone David at his office. "Call off your dog," she implored him. "Tell Bertha it's all right for me to go shopping." Before she rang off, she said, "If you'll give me Mrs. Van Doren's address, I'll buy something for the youngster."

"Thanks," said David.

She couldn't imagine what a little girl of twelve would like. Boys were easier than girls. There were so many things that she could have chosen if Candace were a boy—a handsome knife, or a chemistry set, or a construction outfit to make aeroplanes.

The salesgirl had an inspiration. "Is she too old for wood burning?"

"I don't know. She's brilliant," Claudia returned, discouraged.

She decided, eventually, that books were safer, and selected two of them—a novel about a chipmunk, and a new, much advertised book about a little Swedish boy. Both stories were translations, presumably for children, but aimed at grownups. Personally, Claudia wouldn't have cared to read either of them, but they were essentially in good taste. They were the sort of books that were a credit to the giver, though a shabby trick to play upon a little girl who probably liked boarding-school stories, and romances.

"Charge send."

"Charge send, Madame?" the sales girl asked.

"No," said Claudia. "Charge take."

She telephoned home to talk to Bobby. Bobby was on her mind. He had been so hurt last night, and there hadn't been any time to talk to him this morning before school.

But bygones were clearly bygones as far as Bobby was concerned. Bertha called it "ausgelassen," when he got that way. He was that way now; he was always that way over a telephone.

"That's being silly," Claudia reproved him. "Let me talk to Bertha again."

"All right, Missus!" Bobby considered this excruciatingly witty, and relinquished the instrument to Bertha amid howls of laughter.

"Ach," Bertha apologized for him, with her voice smiling. "Such a foolish child he is. He feels good."

Claudia knocked on the wood of the telephone booth. "Any messages, Bertha?"

"Miss Julia. She has tickets for a concert tonight, if you want them. And the man about the vacuum cleaner."

"Mr. David didn't telephone again?"

"No," said Bertha.

There was no reason in the world to have expected that he would. In the first place, she had spoken to him only a little while ago, and in the second place, he thought that she was out. "And I am out, fool," she told herself.

Irresolutely, she lingered at the door of the booth.

"Staying or going, lady?" inquired a fat man who had been awaiting his turn.

"Staying," Claudia decided. She slid the door to, and dialled David's number. Her heart quickened, she always loved the way he said "Hello." The telephone did nice things to his voice.

He didn't want to seem to be hurrying her, but he had an air of waiting for her to come to the point.

"I'm downtown," she said, befuddled as a schoolgirl. "I bought two books for Candace."

"That's fine," he said.

"I thought I'd take them over myself."

"Fine. You'll find Elizabeth home. I just spoke to her."

Claudia stiffened. Did he speak to Mrs. Van Doren every day?

"I called you," she hastened to explain, gathering the remnants of her pride about her, "to tell you that Julia has tickets for a concert tonight in case you want to go."

He was completely amenable. "Yes, if you'd like to; of course, dear."

He ought to have known that she wouldn't like to in the least, but she said, "Fine!" And then she went on quickly, "I won't keep you, I know you're busy, goodbye."

It was the most unsatisfactory conversation that she had ever had with him. It left her full of hunger for something that seemed no longer to be part of their feeling for each other. It was a frightening thing for two people who loved each other to have suddenly become polite. "I'd rather quarrel," thought Claudia. "We were closer last night, while we were hating each other than we are now." She knew that it was time for her to meet Elizabeth Van Doren.

She felt a little dizzy as she stepped into the street to call a taxi. She glanced at her watch. No wonder. Two o'clock, and she hadn't stopped to eat luncheon. She went back to the drugstore, and climbing up on one of the high slippery seats before the counter, ordered a cup of chocolate

and a sandwich. The chocolate disappointingly was made with hot water, and the sandwich had no magnetism. But she didn't feel like eating, anyway; it would have been hard so swallow past the lump in her throat.

"Is there anything wrong with the food, Miss?"

She was sorry for the clerk. He looked young, and new, and maybe his job depended on whether people liked the way he fixed things. "It's awfully good," she assured him. "But I don't feel very well."

"That's too bad, Miss." His sympathy was tinged with relief. Claudia was glad that she hadn't told him that, in her opinion, he had no talent whatsoever for being a soda clerk.

In the taxi she leaned back and closed her eyes. It behooved her, under the circumstances, to be getting her face in order with powder and lipstick. But to what ends? What did it matter? Mrs. Van Doren obviously had all the advantages in looks, and ten to one she'd be dressed up like Astor's horse in a floating negligee, and looking young enough, according to David's fatuous idea of her, to be her daughter's sister.

The taxi drew to a stop before an austere building on Beekman Place. She sat up and fumbled in her purse with shaking fingers. It was too difficult to count out coins. She gave the driver a dollar and he said, "Thank you, Ma'am," and pocketed it.

"What a nerve," Claudia thought through her maze of misery. She didn't mind giving him a thirty-cent tip but she objected to his taking it for granted. "Keep the change," she said.

"Thank you, Ma'am," he repeated with an affable smile.

The elevator carried her up to the twentieth floor. Somehow she had not expected Mrs. Van Doren to live so high up. She had visioned a rather stuffy, overfurnished little kitchenette apartment, boasting the wrong side of a good address by being on a lower floor and facing a court. But instead she found herself in a spacious foyer, with a wide, curved stairway lending an increased sense of space and emptiness.

"If you'll step into the living room, Mrs. Van Doren will be down in just a moment." The maid, not young, and impeccably uniformed in grey, looked as if she'd been there for years. Her capable removal of Claudia's coat spelled the supreme in service and training. Claudia couldn't fit her in with the kidneys. She had imagined no maid, or, at best, a part-time coloured girl, with odd feet. It was a little upsetting to find that David had misrepresented the facts by merely not presenting them.

The living room was flooded with sunlight. Claudia forgot for a moment that this was the home of her rival. She was keenly susceptible to rooms. So was David. Rooms spoke louder than people, they'd often agreed. She'd never forget how relieved he'd been that she hadn't shown up on their honeymoon with a hankering for a dressing table with a skirt around it, and he'd been glad also, to discover that she didn't like clutter on a mantelpiece, or pictures on a piano. Claudia's eyes swept Mrs. Van Doren's living room. The gleaming black parlour-grand, with the old-fashioned legs of another generation, was guiltless of ornament (except for the permissible bowl of flowers), and the mantel held only a single Chinese figure, flaky with age. "Plagiarist," Claudia muttered. Nor did it help matters to acknowledge that the room wore that

enviable fragrance of simplicity achieved by the housekeeper who was fastidious rather than meticulous. There were groupings of comfortably worn chairs, and plenty of commodious ash trays within easy reach, and books and papers on the desk. She could imagine David smoking his pipe in one of those chairs.

She walked to the broad bay window, and gazed out at the river—not a stingy little view of it, but the whole river, with Blackwell's Island a bit of cardboard scenery, and tugboats steaming past like fat old ladies in a hurry. She could imagine how beautiful it looked toward evening. She could imagine the nostalgic moan of a fèghorn through the dusk.

"David said you might come. I'm so glad."

She turned quickly. Elizabeth Van Doren stood in the doorway. She was dressed in a blue skirt and a white blouse and she had smooth brown hair. She looked as if her heart were very quiet—not at all like Claudia's heart, which was pounding against her ribs.

Mrs. Van Doren held out her hand. Claudia was susceptible to handshakes as well as rooms. She couldn't abide the jellyfish slither of limp fingers, nor did she entirely trust the grim epileptic clutch of the person who was out to show you that he had a good handshake. Her own shake, she had reason to believe, was adequate, erring on neither one side nor the other. Now her clasp met its Waterloo, so to speak. Elizabeth Van Doren's answering pressure left nothing to be desired. It was warm, cordial, and pleasantly firm. She didn't say, "Won't you sit down?" She said, showing nice teeth when she smiled, "Candy's expiring with curiosity. Come on up and see her, won't you?"

Claudia said, "I'd like to." She was grateful for the suggestion. It was an easy way of getting over the first awkwardness of meeting, and besides the sooner she presented the books, the sooner she could get away. She wanted, desperately, to be by herself to think things over. Her head was swimming, and small chill drops of moisture gathered beneath her armpits. She could see, now, why David liked Elizabeth Van Doren. There was no reason why he shouldn't have been drawn to her. It was a cruel truth to have to face. Later, when she could command her voice above the violent tumult of her pulses, she would manage to convey to Mrs. Van Doren that David's happiness meant everything, no matter who was hurt. But for the moment it was all she could do to hold herself together. She seemed to be going to pieces. She couldn't breathe, suddenly. The ceiling came down and pressed against her chest, and the floor slipped drunkenly beneath her.

When she opened her eyes she was lying on the sofa, and Mrs. Van Doren was bending over her.

The middle-aged maid in grey hurried in. "Was that you ringing, Mrs. Van Doren?"

"Get me some whiskey, Mary."

"Did she faint?" Mary's voice was a whisper of horror.

"She's just coming to. Hurry."

Claudia tried to sit up. "Don't be silly," she denied emphatically. "I never faint. I just didn't have any lunch."

"Goin' without lunch, and only just out of the hospital," Mary expostulated indignantly, sounding for all the world like an Irish edition of Bertha.

"Sniff," said Elizabeth.

Claudia sniffed. Her head almost blew off. "My God! What's that?" she gasped.

"Smelling salts." Elizabeth's fingers were around her wrist. "There. That's more like it. Bring her something to eat, Mary."

"That I will. . . ." Mary hesitated. "There's one of those squabs Mrs. Killian sent Miss Candy, hasn't been touched. Or would a couple of poached eggs now, be lighter?" she debated.

Personally, Claudia thought that there was no comparison between eggs and squab, and she was relieved when Mrs. Van Doren said, "The squab, of course, Mary."

Mary bustled out. Things were still shredding a little, but Claudia couldn't help being curious. "How did Mary know I'd been operated?" she asked.

"She prayed for you, the night you were so ill. She's devoted to David."

So David had become a part of the household. Claudia lifted her eyes to meet Elizabeth's steady gaze. Yes, it was all there—without pretence, without shame. It was as if Elizabeth wanted her to know. She caught her breath. There was an all-gone feeling in the pit of her stomach. She felt sick and a little frightened. She began to cry.

"I'm so terribly ashamed," she gulped. "I don't go around fainting and making scenes as a rule."

For an instant Elizabeth's arms were around her. Then quickly she withdrew—and Claudia liked her for both gestures.

"You silly child, you haven't made a scene," she said, crisply. "Anybody that's been through what you've been, is entitled to a little faint their first day out; and skipping lunch like an idiot, in the bargain."

"But, listen, are you positive I fainted?" Claudia marvelled.

"I mean, did I get pale, and my heart go fluttering and all that?"

"White as a ghost and I couldn't get your pulse at all for a moment," Elizabeth assured her. "If David doesn't believe it, I'll stand witness."

"Oh, but he mustn't ever know! He'd never have any respect for me. He can't stand women who faint. Swear you'll never tell him."

Elizabeth regarded her with open approval. "You're a lot straighter than most women," she said. "In fact, you're everything David said you were."

Claudia gave a wry smile. "If I am, believe me, I just manage to get there by the skin of my teeth."

"I don't believe that," said Elizabeth.

"Don't you? I came here today, hating you. I guess that's why I fainted. People can't stand too much hate, without something blowing up in them."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment. Then she said, "I was afraid you'd feel that way toward me. But, in a way, I'm glad. Women in love ought to be jealous. I have no respect for noble women. It just means they've stopped caring."

"You're trying to make it easy for me," Claudia said, shakily. "But it isn't as simple as that. It would have been simpler if you were the sort I thought you'd be."

"What sort did you think I'd be?"

"Somebody I could save him from," said Claudia.

A faint smile tugged at Elizabeth's lips, but she merely said, "Here comes Mary with your tray. Sit up like a good girl, and get some food down you."

"I feel a pig to be depriving Candy."

"You're not. Candy doesn't like squab."

"She's crazy. It's simply marvellous; thanks loads, Mary."

"I'll tell Hilda," Mary said, much pleased.

"Who's Hilda?" Claudia asked, after Mary had departed kitchenwards.

"The cook. I've had both girls ever since I was married."

"We have, too, with Bertha and Fritz. I thought from what David said this is hard to cut. I'm going to take it in my fingers."

"Do. It's the only way. . . . From what David said—what?"

"Goodness, I was hungry. . . . That you did all your own cooking."

"Oh," Elizabeth laughed. "He told you he stayed for lunch yesterday?"

"Yes, he said you gave him kidneys, and they had a wine sauce, and you were a magnificent cook—I could have killed you."

"Sorry. But I am. They did."

"Only Hilda made them."

"No, Hilda didn't make them. I made them." Elizabeth rose abruptly, and walked to the window, her face averted.

Claudia sensed a sudden weakening of the older woman's control. She saw for the first time that Elizabeth's eyes held sorrow, and that there was pain in the set of her lips. As she stood beside the window, with the cold thin rays of a fading winter day resting upon her, she seemed to be enfolded in some ineffable garment of widowhood. Bereavement settled upon her slim shoulders, and a vast loneliness

belied the lift of her head. Pity took all place in Claudia's heart. She thought, "She loved her husband just as I love David. . . ." She said, softly, "I think I understand about the kidneys."

Elizabeth turned. "Do you?"

"Yes. It was one of his favourite dishes, wasn't it? Your husband's, I mean?"

Elizabeth nodded. "He always said that no one could prepare them quite as I did."

"And when you . . ." Claudia faltered a little. "It isn't easy to put in words, but I think I know. It wasn't David you fixed them for yesterday—"

"But it was David!" Elizabeth cried. "That's the wonderful part of it." She returned to the sofa, and took Claudia's hands in hers. "Listen to me. Try to see how it is with us. When Roger first sent him up here with plans for the property John had bought last year, I was closed up in a shell of grief and resentment. David wore his love for you like a banner, and when you fell ill, it was in my soul to wish that you would die. John was young, too. He had all of life before him. Why should I be the only one to know the hopelessness death brings?"

"But that was natural! I'd have felt the same way. I don't see how you could bear the sight of others being happy. It must be so terribly lonely—with no ending to the day. . . ."

"That's the hardest of it," Elizabeth said, huskily. "Twilight comes . . . and the lights play on the river, and your heart breaks. But somehow time passes, and you begin to feel that somewhere in the universe there's a kind of pattern to all suffering. Whether it's war, or famine, or just the pain of a woman who's alone."

"Can you really feel that?" Claudia asked, in deep humility.

"Not always—and not very long at a time," Elizabeth admitted. "But glimpses do come. Yesterday, when I asked David to stay to lunch, I felt as if I had overcome the last of my rebellion. I didn't scream out in my heart, 'Why can't it be John?'—it was as if it were John. That feeling didn't last, though. I cried myself to sleep. Then, today, you came. I didn't expect to like you any more than you expected to like me. I thought you'd be terribly young and hard, and cocksure of yourself. But you're not. And I find myself being glad for David that he has you. And glad for you, that you have David. In some strange way, it's as if I'd found my happiness with John again, after months of blackness and despair."

"But what about us?" Claudia cried. "I mean, I'd be a beast if I grudged what you say David's done for you, but . . ."

"But what?" Elizabeth prodded gently.

"I wish you'd have picked somebody else's husband to help you find the pattern," Claudia blurted out.

Elizabeth's eyes were clear. "Why?" she asked.

"We quarrelled last night."

"Over me?"

"Yes—No—I don't know," Claudia stammered. "How do I know that he isn't in love with you?"

"I don't think he is," said Elizabeth, quietly.

Claudia gave a small and rather shaky laugh. "That doesn't make me feel very safe."

"Should one feel safe?"

"I suppose not. I might as well wish I could keep the

sun from shining, or the rain from falling. If it had to be anyone, I'm glad it's somebody I can like, too."

Elizabeth leaned over and laid her lips for the barest instant against Claudia's cheek. "John would have adored you," she whispered exultantly.

Absurdly, Claudia flushed with pleasure. "That makes me feel like a million dollars," said she.

She saw Candy before she left. Candy had been waiting her chance. She called down "Mother!" when she heard them in the hall.

"Oh, Lord," said Elizabeth. "She'll never forgive me. Can you manage the stairs?"

"Of course I can. I'm perfectly all right. Besides, I want to see her. David said she was brilliant. Which burned me up no end. He never praises his own children."

"Oh, doesn't he? He's talked about them until I could yell."

Candy was sitting up in an easy chair, with a blanket over her knees. "Thank heaven," Claudia thought, "that I didn't bring her a wood-burning set." David hadn't exaggerated; Candy and Elizabeth looked like sisters, for the child was one of those overdeveloped youngsters, who have to wait until their years catch up to their glands. At eighteen, she might well be beautiful—sleeked down to a perfect proportion of weight and height—but at twelve, she was ludicrously out of scale with a large high bust, and the heavy, knuckly bones of an overgrown puppy. The only childish thing about her was the gold brace on her teeth, and her very brown eyes, and the surprisingly sweet treble of a babyish voice.

"Hello! I brought you some books," Claudia said, offering the package.

Candy tore the paper eagerly. "Oh, thank you!" She picked up the book about the chipmunk. "It's the new one by Frederic Heise, Mother!" She turned to Claudia. "I've read Angi . . ." she explained. "I liked it very much."

"That was the one about the squirrel, wasn't it?" Claudia hazarded. "It was charming."

"Oh, did you read it?"

"No," said Claudia.

Candy laughed. "She's funny, isn't she, Mother? The way Uncle David said she was."

"You don't know the half of it, Candy," said Elizabeth, solemnly. "She's even funnier."

"They must have been so happy when John was here with them," Claudia reflected. She began to see how David's visits had focused their disrupted lives into a semblance of normality. When she left them, she carried with her the sharp taste of their aloneness. The big spacious apartment seemed empty and waiting for a footstep that would never come. Such loneliness was wrong, it dammed back the stream of life.

"There'll be a day," Claudia thought, "when she'll know that it's right to marry again."

She smiled. Elizabeth was wise, but there were some things that she was not yet ready to let into her consciousness. She would not want to admit that already David was opening the way for that day to come.

It was after six when she arrived home. He was waiting for her, furious. He'd been home for an hour, he said; where the blazes had she been?

"You brazen storyteller, you've been home exactly five minutes. The hallboy told me."

"Well, where the blazes have you been, anyway?" he demanded.

"Elizabeth's."

He was incredulous. "All this time?"

"Yes, indeed. Us two girls got to know each other very well. . . . You might kiss me."

He kissed her. "Pretty swell person, don't you think?"

"Pretty swell," said Claudia.

He kissed her again.

At the table, he noticed that she hardly touched her plate. He seemed worried about it. She didn't want to tell him that she'd eaten a large squab dinner in the middle of the afternoon, so she merely said, "I'm a little tired."

"Then there'll be no concert."

"Oh, dear, I'm so disappointed," said Claudia, who didn't have the slightest intention, even under favourable conditions, of sitting through two hours of unadulterated soprano.

"What's the matter you're tired?" he reverted, uneasily remembering last night. "Don't you feel well?"

"Not too well. I fainted this afternoon," she said, lightly.

He dipped a stalk of celery on to the salt, and ate it, pretty noisily. "That's too bad," he said.

Claudia took a piece of celery, too. "David, are you in love with Elizabeth?" she asked.

"Oh, passionately," he assured her.

She put the celery down, without eating it. Marriage, she decided, could be a very complicated affair, especially when it was a marriage built on love.

"Would it be sissy," she said in a small voice, "if I went right to bed?"

David averred that on the contrary, it would be highly

sensible. "I'll play one game of checkers with Bobby, and join you," he said.

Bertha had already turned down the blankets. Claudia caught her just in time. "Oh, Bertha, not that nightgown, it's too old. Use it for a dustcloth."

"That's wastel!" Bertha cried in horror. "My Lisa will be glad to have it!"

Claudia was always pleased when Bertha fell into the dustcloth trap. She had a definite aversion to giving away clothes that were worn or mended, and many a discarded garment had tactfully found its way to Bertha's Lisa via the rag bag.

Now she opened her bureau drawer and gloated over the affluent pile of gowns achieved under pressure of necessity. She chose a very fancy one that she'd never gotten around to wearing in the hospital, and which she was saving for her next confinement. She dabbed some perfume on it, and tossed it over to the bed. Bertha caught it, and arranged it lovingly. "Ach," she brooded, "it's so beautiful, it's a shame to wear it."

"I'll be careful of it," Claudia promised. "It'll be as good as new in the morning—Oh, and listen, Bertha, isn't it about time for calf's liver again?"

Bertha's face lit up. "Yah. Just today I was thinking we should have it tomorrow night. With onions," she added, suavely.

"Good. Only make it kidneys," said Claudia. "With a wine sauce."

Eight

BERTHA DIDN'T LIKE HER DAY OFF ANY MORE THAN CLAUDIA did. "She's a nymphomaniac," Claudia confided to David, on a Thursday morning at breakfast.

"A what?" said David.

"She thinks the minute she's out of the house, everything'll go wrong."

"You mean a megalomaniac," said David.

Claudia conceded the error, unabashed.

"Do you know what a nymphomaniac is?" David pursued.

"Somebody who likes to set fire or steal, I can never remember which." Doubt assailed her. "Or is it the other thing?"

"It's the other thing," said David, briefly. "So don't go around calling people it."

Bobby came in ready for school, and, as usual, in a rush. "Where's the newspaper?" he demanded breathlessly.

David lowered the stock-market page. "Who wants it?"

"Come here and let me button your coat right," Claudia ordered. "You've got two buttonholes on the same button, Bobbie."

Bobby pulled away from her. "I can't wait," he told her, desperately. "I'll be late and I have to have the newspaper. I have to find a current event for social studies."

"Goodness," Claudia murmured. "Yesterday an egg tomorrow a feather duster."

Bobby didn't know what she was talking about. Claudia said she was talking about a chicken. "It's the same with you," she said. "Next thing I know you'll be asking for a latchkey."

"And not getting it, if Mamma has anything to say about it," David put in.

All this seemed beside the point to Bobby. "I have to have a current event," he reiterated.

Claudia reached for the front page. "What would you like? We have a nice fresh assortment of the latest murders, scandals, politics—"

"Let him find his own," David interjected. "Look here, young man, why didn't you do this last night, instead of leaving it for the last minute?"

"Because I had to have my hair washed, and get right into bed afterwards—" Bobby's voice cracked with resentment.

"That's true, he did," said Claudia.

"You baby him too much," David held forth.

Claudia made the flat lips of exasperation. David glanced up and caught her at it. "That's woman's most winsome facial expression, and why men leave home," he remarked.

"All right, and it's man's most irritating remark, and why women leave home. *Baby him*. Certainly. Why not? What's the great rush of growing up, anyhow? What's he going to do when he gets there?"

"What does t-o-r-s-o spell?" Bobby interrupted, peering over the paper, and breathing heavily.

"Here, son," David hastily interposed. "You don't want that current event, I'll find you one."

Claudia snickered. "Don't baby him," she mocked.

The unjust part of it was that she didn't baby the boy at all. Naturally, she felt that he was too young to do practically everything that he did do, but she made the effort, nevertheless, to look as if she approved. For one thing, she permitted him to join an afternoon group twice a week, headed by a brace of baffled college graduates, all dressed up in masters' degrees and no place to go. David wasn't

crazy about the idea of supervised play, but he felt that these were nice clean lads, poor devils, and that it was a great deal better for Bobby to learn the rudiments of baseball than to hang around a baby carriage every afternoon.

Bertha agreed reluctantly. "Only we don't let him go more than Thursdays and Saturdays," she stipulated. "Enough is enough."

"Thursday's your afternoon out," Claudia reminded her.

"That's why it's good," Bertha explained. "You have plenty to do with Matthew, and fixing supper."

Claudia felt that she ought to argue the point. "By rights, I should look forward to Thursdays and taking care of my own children," she confessed to David.

"Who said so?" David replied, being his most satisfactory self.

"All the best books on child study."

"How do you know? You never read one."

"That's nothing to brag about," said Claudia, severely.

"Does a cow?" asked David.

"Please don't call me a cow."

"It's a compliment, you ninny. For my money a cow knows all the answers," He shrugged. "But go ahead and read a book on child study if it'll make you happy."

"But it won't," Claudia complained. "That's what's wrong with me. I have no theories."

"No theories is all right with me," said David, looking pleased.

Bertha, too, was pleased that the only talent Claudia showed for motherhood was being a mother. Claudia gathered that Bertha's particular bench in the park discussed at length the many domestic complications that invariably arose with the adoption of intensive intelligent parenthood, and Bertha took no pains to hide the fact that she thanked her lucky stars that Claudia didn't go in for lectures and

Parent-Teacher meetings. True, neither Bobby nor Matthew had any "problems," but Bertha was convinced that their normality was due to their mother's complete abstinence from all intellectual pursuits.

"I must never," Claudia told David, "let Bertha see that I'm anything but an utter moron."

"Which won't be too difficult," said David, like a Jekyll and Hyde.

As a matter of fact, it would have been difficult to have persuaded Bertha to believe otherwise. Although she acknowledged that Claudia had performed, most creditably, the supreme function of womanhood, she regarded the result in the light of a typographical error and reshaped her duties to embrace the full charge of three motherless children. Her afternoons off, especially, were fraught with all the anxiety of leaving the household without adult supervision, and if it weren't for seeing Lisa, who was a source of continued anxiety, she wouldn't have gone out at all.

On the particular Thursday to which Claudia referred, she was taking Lisa to the doctor's at two o'clock. "I have anyway time to call for Bobby at school and send him upstairs," she discovered after she'd settled Matthew for his nap. "And everything is ready for his lunch, only to put the gas under—Also," she added, elliptically, "both children went very good, so don't worry."

Claudia relaxed. This final bit of superb generalship was in truth a load off her mind. "Then everything," she assured Bertha, happily, "ought to be clear sailing."

Bobby announced his arrival, a short while later, by a succession of brutal attacks upon the bell. Claudia's hopes for clear sailing vanished. She raced to the door, and told him for heaven's sake to shut up, the baby was just falling asleep.

"I came home alone," he proclaimed loudly, oblivious of his mother's chill reception. "Bertha didn't call for me. I came home alone. I crossed the streets all by myself and I came home alone. Bertha didn't call for me."

"In other words, Bertha didn't call for you, and you came home alone." Claudia tried to rule the acidity from her voice. For all his high I.Q., he was apparently a half-wit. She studied him with detachment, and wondered why he gave the impression of wearing horn-rimmed spectacles and braces on his teeth, when he had David's perfectly good eyes, and her own passable mouth. It was probably his clothes, she concluded, for Bertha belonged to the school of thrift that believed in buying one size larger to allow for growth.

"You don't believe me," he broke in upon her, truculently.

"Don't believe you, what?"

"That I came home alone. I did though. Bertha didn't call for me. I came home all by myself, alone."

He was a poor liar, like his father. He could scarcely keep back the give-away laughter that crowded up in him, his shoulders hunched in imbecilic mirth. "I did, honestly I did," he insisted.

According to all tenets of raising the young, Claudia knew that she should descend to his level, and identify herself with the childish drama that was going on inside his brain. "In the pig's eye, I will," she inwardly rebelled.

"Oh, don't be a fool," she adjured him, bluntly.

For a moment he was nonplussed by such unvarnished candour. But only for a moment. "You didn't see Bertha bring me, did you?" he argued, stubbornly.

Claudia was reasonable. "Look, darling," she said, "believe me when I say you really are a fool, won't you?"

He made no reply, but his lower jaw retreated in a sheepish acknowledgment. Generously, she changed the subject.

"Now, run and wash," she suggested, with a friendly smile. "Your lunch is ready."

He started to move obediently toward the hall, and then stopped. "Idonhafter," he announced, triumphantly.

Claudia winced. "*I don't have to*," she corrected with emphasis on the consonants. "What do you mean, you don't have to?" she caught herself up sternly. "Since when don't you have to? You most certainly do have to."

"But she said I didn't. She said I was clean."

"Who's she, the cat's mother?"

"What cat?" asked Bobby, interested.

"No cat, skip it. Who said you didn't have to?"

"Bertha did. She went in with me while I washed in school. She said you wouldn't have to bother if I was all finished washing when I came home."

This fitted perfectly with Bertha's megalomaniac tendencies. However, Claudia drew him to the window to make sure. "I don't know whether that's freckles or dirt." She rubbed at the offending area. "I guess it's freckles—Wait a minute." She caught him by the lobe of an ear and peered within. "How do you do it?" she marvelled. "You had a bath last night, and now you've got potatoes growing in there again."

Bobby was intrigued by the idea of personal vegetation, but he wasn't too certain that it wasn't just another fantasy like the cat. He eyed his mother distrustfully. "I'm not going to wash," he stated with finality. "I washed already."

"My dear fellow," said Claudia, "I wouldn't dream of asking you to expose yourself to soap and water twice in one hour."

Bobby staggered, mentally. It was like flinging himself against a locked door, only to find that it wasn't locked at all.

"Do you mind eating in the kitchen?" She continued pleasantly: "You're going to, whether you do or not."

"I'd rather eat in the kitchen than any place else," he said with a note of deep contentment creeping into his voice.

"Me, too," said Claudia.

"Why?" he asked, curiously.

"I don't know. More homely, I guess."

"Are you and Daddy going to eat in the kitchen tonight, with Bertha out?"

"I wouldn't be surprised." She placed a tray of steaming food on the white porcelain table. "Come along."

"It's hot!" he bleated, backing away from it.

"Next time I'll cook it in the icebox for you."

He approved the sally with a faint grin, and began on his chocolate pudding. Claudia removed it. "No, sir. Meat and spinach first."

He lifted a morsel to his lips. "What kind of meat is it?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Calf's liver."

He shuddered violently, as if with ague. "I hate calf's liver. Why do I have to eat it?"

"It's a state law, didn't you know it? Calf's liver once a week—Matthew loved his," she added, brightly.

"Matthew can have mine, too," he said.

He sounded like David, and Claudia giggled. Bobby struggled against a self-conscious smirk of pleasure at this delayed appreciation of his wit. He began to act silly, and Claudia told him not to gild the lily.

"What lily?" they asked in unison and then they both laughed.

"Look." She abruptly got back to business. "What about eating? The group will be here for you, and you'll still be pushing food around your plate."

He speeded up sporadically, loading a fork with spinach, only to unload it before carrying it to his lips.

"You're not fooling anything but the spinach," Claudia

mildly enlightened him. "Also, it's not honourable to hide your liver under the potato skin."

"I like potato skin. I like the group, too," he remarked with catholic inclusion. "Don't you?"

"Yes, I like it," Claudia admitted.

"All mothers like it," said Bobby.

She glanced at him. There was simplicity in his face, and simplicity in his statement, like the line drawing of a genius. "Touché," she murmured.

The telephone rang. "That's Daddy," he exclaimed. "Can I talk to him?"

Claudia hesitated. David and she did not belong to that vast army of grownups who revelled in the sound of little voices over the telephone. They had long since made a pact that they would never permit their children to pick up the receiver to defenceless callers.

"Must you?" she now asked Bobby, doubtfully.

He weighed it. "No," he acknowledged with a nice understanding.

"I think Bobby's going to be a very satisfactory person," Claudia told David at once.

"Do you?" said David. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. He just shows signs."

"That's fine," said David. "It'd be hell to live with a child you didn't like."

"Yes, wouldn't it? I hope Matthew turns out to be one of us, too."

"I hope so," said David.

"Your father," Claudia told Bobby when she returned to the kitchen, "Is a very satisfactory person."

"What does satisfactory mean?"

"Sugar and spice and everything nice. . . . Now run in and rest on my bed while I wash up these couple of dishes."

He said, "All right," without putting up his usual

argument that only sissies had to lie down after lunch. She felt his forehead. He seemed normal. "Be sure to take your shoes off!" she called after him.

She found him, a little later, lying in the middle of the big bed, his face averted. She picked up one shoe near the doorway and another by the window. "That's a fine way to kick off your new oxfords without untying the laces," she commented.

"They have knots in," he returned, virtuously.

"And why have they knots in, pray?"

"They get in," he said.

She noticed that he refrained from turning toward her, and that the back of his head looked guilty. She walked to the other side of the bed, and caught him unawares.

"Heavens," she said, staring at the unpleasant grime that festooned his mouth and chin. "Where'd all that dirt come from on your face?"

"It isn't dirt," he denied, indignantly. "It's gum."

"Why is it plastered all over your lips?"

"It's bubble gum," he said.

Memories flooded back on her. Bubble gum—second largest vice of childhood. No need to ask him where he had learned about it. It was bound to have happened sooner or later.

"Run, spit it out," she said gently, but firmly.

He stiffened. "I won't," he said, flatly. He looked a little frightened, a little uncertain, as if he were trying out a new and shaky pair of wings. He seemed, suddenly, to be soaring away from her. For a space, they had been close in spirit, but now they were apart again. She was sorry. She tried to bridge the gap with sober logic.

"Bobby," she said, like an echo from the past, "bubble gum is a nasty habit. You never see really nice children chewing it."

"Why not?"

"For 'one thing, it spoils the shape of your lips, and besides, it oughtn't to splatter, you don't know how to use it."

"I do so," he broke in eagerly. "You ought to see how good I can do it! I'll show you, look! I'll blow a bubble for you, and you can see how good I am!"

"Ah," she said, "I'm not deaf."

"Just one bubble," he pleaded in a hoarse whisper.

She looked at him. He was so ardent. She didn't have the heart to refuse him. "Just one," she surrendered.

Bobby sat up straight and squared his shoulders. His jaws began to work. Then, with a great deal of facial contortion, a small weak bubble appeared through his lips, wavered for the barest instant, and collapsed.

"Wasn't that good?" he asked, smugly.

Claudia shook her head. "Not really."

He bridled. "It was a bubble," he defended, "and it didn't splatter."

"It was too little to splatter. I could blow a bubble three times that size."

He became all male, and laughed out raucously, in derision. He was David, telling her that she didn't know how to use a can opener, or push the lawn mower.

"So you don't think I know anything about bubble gum," she challenged. "If I had a piece, I'd show you. A fresh piece," she hastened to qualify.

For answer he dug into his pocket, and withdrew an unopened package of the dynamic confection. Misgiving assailed her. What right had she to have been so cocksure that she could remember the involved technique of producing bubbles?

"Try it!" Bobby invited in malicious glee. "Go on and try it!"

There was no turning back now. She slipped off the silver paper, and popped the gum into her mouth. It was just as she remembered it—deliciously like bad perfume, and at once limp, and incredibly tough.

"You have to chew hard," Bobby instructed.

"Am I doing this, or are you?" she retorted smartly.

Bobby chewed along with her, tossing off a small bubble or two, the expert against the novice. "It's easy!" he gloated.

Claudia's jaws were getting tired. The sweetness was gone from the gum, and it had become an unfriendly wad of blubber against her palate. She tested it tentatively with her tongue, aware that Bobby was watching her with David's wicked grin, awaiting failure. She was a fool to have let herself in for this. Yet she mustn't fail. She must wait until the crucial moment when the gum was ready to blow. She closed her eyes. The years slipped away . . . She heard the metallic clatter of the ice man's tongs, she saw the lamplighter going down the street with his high taper, she knew the joy of hitting the edge of somebody's stoop in stoopball. She was six, chewing bubble gum on the sly. . .

Her lids flew open, to find her son's gaze upon her, wide with amazement and respect. She knew that she had come through with honours. It had been a handsome bubble and it hadn't splattered.

"Do it again!" he urged her, excitedly. "Show me how you do it, do it again!"

She did it again. It was apparently something you never forgot—like riding a bicycle, or floating. Bobby's eyes filled with growing reverence. Once in a great while David had worn that look—right after the babies were born, and again when she was operated on.

"You see, Bobby," she pointed out with importance,

"when you start to blow the bubble, you have to take it very easy—"

The bell rang. "It's the group," said Bobby, and there was a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

Claudia glanced at her watch. "Oh, dear," she said. "I'm afraid it is."

Their eyes met for an instant, full of regret. He clambered down from the bed with a sigh. Claudia loved his sighing. She wanted to give him a great hug, but she thought better of it. Bobby wasn't a kissing child. She said instead, quite casually. "Better get cleaned up while I open the door."

"We've been held up a little," she apologized to the young man who stood on the threshold. Her smile was secret, as if she had stolen love, and it lay precious and hidden against her heart. But when Bobby bounded into the hall a few moments later, she might have been the wind for all he heeded her—the group was again the paramount joy in his life.

"Hi, Pip!" he shouted in greeting. (Everyone called Pip, "Pip," though his name was Richard.)

"Hi, there, Bob!"

Pip liked Bobby, and for that reason Claudia liked Pip, who was about as nice a person as ever wore a signet ring. He had beautiful manners and a clear open face a little like an underwear button. "I bet if he has a mother, he's awfully good to her," Claudia had remarked to David, and David had agreed, somewhat abstrusely, that he looked like the sort of a young man with a mother who expected to have a son who was good to her. It was on the subtle side, but Claudia knew exactly what he meant. It had a lot to do with Pip's not smoking or drinking, or running around with girls—which made him the perfect influence for young children.

Certainly Bobby adored him, and now, as Claudia watched them together, she had a sense of being an outsider. David felt the same way. They talked about it once or twice. But David didn't fight it. He seemed satisfied that it was a good relationship—robust and full of inner health, holding a little but not too much of hero worship. "I suppose being a parent automatically cuts you off from being a lot of other things," Claudia had concluded, and David had said, "Damn right." He didn't often say that she was "damn right," and she'd been rather puffed up, knowing that she'd hit upon something fairly juicy in its implications.

"What are we doing to-day, Pip?" Bobby continued, with an illusion of clearing his throat and sticking his thumbs beneath his armpits.

"Some of us are going to the zoo, and some of us are going roller skating in the park," said Pip.

Bobby's thumbs came out of his armpits. "Yippee!" he cried, leaping in the air, with his knees up.

"Oh, the zoo will be lots of fun," Claudia offered swiftly.

Bobby's face fell. "But I want to go skating," he expostulated.

"No, dear."

Pip saw trouble coming. "I wouldn't have mentioned it," he explained in an aside, "only Bobby told me he was a good skater."

"But I am," Bobby protested.

"I know you are," Claudia granted, hastily. "But you've always had Bertha watching you."

"Oh, I'll watch him," Pip said. "You don't have to worry about that."

"You'll have so many to watch—"

"I have to go!" Bobby cried, in a kind of frenzy.

"Bobby, no. Please. Wait until you're older before you try to skate with a crowd."

"I'm old enough." He wheeled upon her, mutinously, but his eyes were filled with hurt rather than with enmity, and she knew that she had let him down. She hadn't meant to, but it had happened. In the brief passage of a single moment, she had chained him to her, and had lost him. Once again, they were strangers, forever linked by the accident of birth.

"I have to go," he repeated in a stiff, hard voice. "You have to let me go."

It was easy to mistake despair for insolence, and, in the name of discipline, she could deny him with a perfect justice.

"No, Bobby, I don't have to do anything of the sort," she corrected, firmly.

Bobby drew his breath in sharply. Claudia thought, "At this moment he hates me." Pip must have known it, too. He put his hand on Bobby's shoulder. "Look, old man," he said, with an air of understanding all sides of the case, "you don't want to upset your mother. I mean, if it was my mother, and I were you, I wouldn't go."

Bobby said nothing. He stood, torn with conflict. Claudia was torn with conflict, too. She looked at her son, and she looked at Pip's soft, round face. What a very kind and gentle soul he was. His mother would always be proud of him. He wore her pride like a halo, and neither of them realized that it had long since slipped into a noose.

"Will you see that he doesn't skate too fast?" she asked with effort.

Bobby would hardly believe his ears. "Yippee!" he cried, "I can go!"

She walked with them to the door. Bobby rushed to the elevator to ring the bell, his skates jangling from his arm. The cables whirled. The elevator door slid open.

"Have a grand time!" Claudia called after them.

Bobby hesitated, and then, all at once, he turned back and flung himself against her, his small arms straining in a quick, hard hug. He was away from her before she could hug him back, but for a long moment after he had gone, the warm damp odour of him lingered. "He's beginning to smell," David had remarked a few weeks ago. It was true—Bobby smelled like a little boy now. It was the sort of smell that only mothers and fathers would like, but it was wonderful just the same. She waited until the elevator door opened in the lobby below, and then she went back into the apartment, feeling full and rich.

In a little while Matthew woke up. Claudia gave him his milk and tucked him into his carriage. He hadn't quite come back from his vast journey into sleep. He held a woolly dog in his fat hands, and studied it, his lips pushed out and his opaque blue eyes crossing ever so slightly in inscrutable cogitation.

"You Funnymelink," said Claudia.

He made no response. The exquisite idiocy of babyhood still enfolded him. "You're not very congenial," she chided him.

Nevertheless, she discovered that it was fun to wheel him up and down the avenue amid a Thursday regiment of mothers, who didn't have anything half as good to show. "If I set my mind to it, and if Bertha would only give me a chance, I could make a very professional mother," she thought. David, of course, wouldn't like the idea too much. Professional mothers usually made inferior wives, forever imbedded in the cradle, so to speak. "I'd better go easy," she decided. "I'd better not sell a perfectly good husband for a mess of porridge." After all, anybody could push a perambulator, but it was a twenty-four hour job to keep a marriage going properly—if it were the proper kind of marriage.

The clamour of ambulance bells coming out of nowhere sliced through into her thoughts. Her heart stopped. She was a fool about an ambulance; the sight of one tearing through the streets never failed to fill her with dread. She quickened her steps. The air had turned bleak with the setting of the sun. How good it would be to get back to the warmth and safety of home. It didn't make any difference that it was only a furnished apartment—it was home because it held the three people she loved most in the world.

She found, all at once, that she couldn't divide them in her thoughts. David was the children, and the children were David. There was something beautiful and right in their going their separate ways each morning, and coming together again at night. Perhaps that was the way it would be through the long ages of eternity. She supposed that some families didn't really belong together—it was only a temporary arrangement for the space of a single lifetime. But it wasn't going to be that way with David and herself and Bobby and Matthew. She knew it almost as surely as if God had stepped down from his heaven to tell her so.

She had an impulse, as she let herself into the dim, empty apartment, to light all the lights, to fill all the rooms with light. She wanted light, against the darkness of the night outside.

She settled Matthew in his crib, and while she heated his cereal, she set the table in the kitchen, and laid a plate for Bobby as a special treat. "Yippee!" she said.

She glanced at her watch. Twenty to six. The group always broke up before five. Maybe her watch was fast. She telephoned downstairs to ask the hallboy.

"What's the right time, James?"

"Five forty-seven, Mrs. Naughton."

Five forty-seven. She had a great respect for people who

told time the hard way. She had to reckon it out. Why, it was later than quarter to; her watch was slow, not fast. What could be keeping him?

She was about to telephone Pip's house to find out if anything was wrong, when the bell rang. Her heart lifted in a wave of relief. Funny that he rang only once, though. Then she remembered that she had reproved him that afternoon, for almost blasting the roof off. She was touched at his restraint.

"Nobody home!" she called out with her hand on the knob, rewarding him with a little of the lunacy that so delighted him. There was no answer.

"I said 'Nobody home!' " she insisted doggedly.

In reply, the bell pealed out again—as if it were being rung by a person who meant business, who had no time to waste on nonsense. It would serve her jolly well right, she thought with amusement, if he gave her back her own rebuke.

"So I'm a fool, am I?" she arraigned him, as she swung the door wide open.

The words choked in her throat. Once, in a nightmare she had dreamed of a policeman standing at her door with a little book in his hand, and the tidings of death in his eyes.

He said—and it was like the nightmare, too—"Are you Mrs. Naughton?"

Her lips moved, but no sound came. There were two of her all at once. One of her cowered and covered her face and cried out in denial. The other of her stood straight and still, and heard what he had to say, and let life come to an end within her. The policeman's shoes were black and shiny, and smelled of polish. He moved them restlessly beneath her scrutiny. It would have been easier for him if she screamed.

Pip was waiting at the hospital. He looked so full of

suffering that the policeman thought he was her husband, and left them together.

"Oh, God," said Pip. It was all he could manage to bring out. His poor round face was twisted and old with pain. "You're wonderful," he whispered, in awe. "You're so quiet."

"I'm not letting myself feel," said Claudia. She didn't say that she was dead inside. He wouldn't have understood. He wouldn't have understood, either, how she could have moved so steadily about the business of locking the apartment, and leaving word for Bertha that she was taking the baby to Mrs. Van Doren. Elizabeth, oddly, was the first person that she'd thought of—the only person—and Elizabeth, with a divine comprehension, had asked no questions. She had seemed to know that it was best not to intrude upon that merciful numbness. She had said merely, "May I go with you?" and Claudia had answered, "I'd rather go alone, I'm all right."

She would have kept on being all right, being quite dead, if Pip hadn't begun to babble how it had happened. The policeman had already told her, but Pip seemed to want to tell her, too. It was like a confession to cleanse his soul. "Another boy lost his balance, and Bobby couldn't stop himself with the push. He skidded off into the street. A car was turning the corner—" A violent shudder shook Pip's crouching shoulders. "He was unconscious when we picked him up. I went with him in the ambulance. They took him right upstairs. I tried to get you on the 'phone, but there wasn't any answer, so I left word for your husband at his office. His secretary said she'd reach him—" He wrung his hands. "Oh, it's so awful to have to wait without knowing whether he's alive or dead!"

His fear destroyed her. Life flowed back into her in waves of agony. She rushed to the corridor. A nurse

passed. Claudia caught her arm in frenzy. "My little boy. . . . He was just brought in. . . . I've got to go to him. . . ."

The nurse looked down from her great height of authority. "I'm sure everything is being done," she said, not unkindly. "The doctor will be with you presently." She knew how to deal with hysterical mothers. Claudia found herself alone.

She saw a man in white coat. "Please, Doctor . . ." she approached him, sobbingly.

The man shook his head. "I'm an orderly," he said.

David came a few minutes later. He was strong, and he was calm. It filled her with wonder that he could be so master of himself. Only the little vein beating in his temple, and the way his jaw was set, showed what was going on within him. He took her hand and held it, and it was as if strength flowed into her. He nodded to Pip. "I'll go up to the operating room," he said.

"But they won't let you!" Claudia cried.

"They'll let me," David promised her.

It seemed to be hours before he came back. His lips smiled assuringly, but his eyes told a different story. Sanity deserted her. "David, he's dead!"

"Nonsense."

"David, you're lying to me!"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Do you really mean it, sir?" Pip's voice trembled with relief. Tears rolled, unashamed, down his round cheeks.

"There are no bones broken," David said.

"I want to be with him! Let me go to him!"

He held her back. "Not yet, dear. He's still asleep."

A little cry escaped her. "You mean he's still unconscious!"

"Well, naturally, why not?" David brusquely injected. "He's had a damn good conk on the head. . . ."

He didn't tell her until the next day that it was a fractured skull. It was easier for her to know it when she could sit with Bobby and hold his hand, and hear him speak, occasionally, from the white bandages that made his face look small, and pale, and like an angel's face.

"All kids look like angels when they're sick," said David. He couldn't fool her, though. His heart was breaking. There was a night when she held him in her arms, and was strong, while grief had its way with him at last.

"We'll never lose him," she whispered. "Even if he dies, he's part of us. . . ."

David was rebellious. "It's not enough. . . ."

"It's more than most people have," said Claudia.

He raised his head to look at her. With his finger tips, he touched her lips, her eyes, as if he would imbibe some secret knowing that was her's.

"Yes," he said at last. "It's more than most people have."

It was strange that it should have been the next morning that the doctor told them that Bobby was going to get well.

He was in the hospital for three weeks, and he lost the look of an angel.

"He's a little devil," said the day nurse, fondly. "He keeps nagging to go home."

"But, darling," Claudia appealed to him, "you're having a lovely time, aren't you, with everybody sending you such wonderful toys?"

"I have to go to the group," said Bobby.

"There's not going to be any more group." But she didn't say it aloud, for there was nothing to be gained by making an issue of it while he was still laid up. It was one of the first things, however, that she and Bertha had decided. Bertha, who had aged ten years in the past weeks, was, in her own manner of speaking, finished with groups. "From now on," she ordained, "I take my day off after supper."

"No such thing," Claudia protested. "I'm going to be a lot more active when it comes to the children."

"Ach," said Bertha, looking worried.

Bobby looked worried, too, when his mother hinted of gay times to come. "We'll have the nicest sprees together," she confided to him.

"What are sprees?" he queried, doubtfully.

"Oh, long walks, and picnics, and all that sort of thing."

He was politely appreciative, but nothing more.

"Don't you love me?" she asked him, only half in jest.

He said he loved her. He said he loved the group, too. He seemed to have forgotten that he had flirted with death.

"It's amazing, isn't it," Claudia said to David. "The way he acts, you'd think that nothing had ever happened to him."

"What's amazing about it?"

"You seem to have forgotten what's happened, too," she accused him.

"Completely," he said. "Suppose you try and do the same."

Her voice trembled with emotion. "I'll never forget!" she cried.

"That's going to be swell for Bobby," he said.

She made no mention of her plans until a few days before Bobby was ready to come home.

"David," she said one evening, as they were undressing

to go to bed, "as long as you're tied up here until May, would you object if I took Bobby straight up to the farm from the hospital?"

"Certainly I'd object," he promptly replied.

"But that's unreasonable. Bertha will be here to take care of you and Matthew."

"What about you?"

"I'll have Fritz, and I can always get Mrs. Cootz to come in to do the heavy cleaning and some cooking."

"I don't get the point of it," he insisted.

"The point is, that I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"You've been doing the wrong kind of thinking," David said, slipping boot trees into his shoes. "Did you see my slippers?"

"Here. Under the chair. David, listen."

He took them. "Thanks. I don't want to listen. It's ridiculous."

"Oh, please don't make it so hard for me," she begged. "I hate to leave you—I never thought we'd turn into a weekend marriage—but there comes a time when a woman's got to put her children before her husband."

"Not before this husband," said David, firmly.

"But that's selfish!"

"Look here, don't you think if I thought it was best for Bobby to leave for the farm now, I'd let you take him? No, by God, I wouldn't. I'd have Bertha take both youngsters, and you'd stay where you belong. With me."

She couldn't help feeling warm, and thrilled inside. He had a cave-man look to him.

"But Bobby doesn't need the country to recuperate," he went on. "I'm not worried about his fractured skull. That's all healed up. But I don't want him to have another fracture that will never heal."

"Oh, I know," she put in witheringly. "You want him to be a man and stand on his own two feet."

"Without fear," he amended. "Without your fear."

"But the city's no place for children!" she argued, vehemently. "Can you deny that if we'd stayed up in the country this would never have happened?"

"You mentioned Mrs. Cootz before," said David, with apparently no relevance. "Do you remember little Joey?"

"Yes, of course I remember little Joey. Why?"

"Little Joey's dead," said David quietly. "He fell from the hayloft last week, and broke his neck."

She gave a cry of shock and horror. "Oh, no!—Who told you?"

"Fritz. I didn't want you to know. But maybe it's better if you do."

She sank into a chair, stricken and vicariously bereaved. David patted her shoulder. "He was a nice kid," he muttered huskily.

"Oh, David," she whispered. "It's such an awfully big dose of philosophy to swallow at a single gulp."

"I choked on it too," said David.

They didn't speak again until they were in bed.

"David . . ." said Claudia, into the darkness.

"Yes, dear."

"Bobby wants to go back to the group."

"I know it. He wants another pair of skates, too. He told me."

Claudia didn't answer. After a little silence, David softly called, "Are you asleep?"

"No," said Claudia, "I'm thinking—The right kind of thinking." She turned and put her arms around him.

Nine

IT WAS SUNDAY. CLAUDIA SAID, "WHAT ABOUT ANOTHER baby?" and David said, "I don't hear well."

"That's enough to insult a horse," said Claudia, affronted. "You don't know the first thing about etiquette."

David asked her if she were a horse, and what the matter had to do with etiquette. "Two's enough," he said and went on reading.

She looked sulky. "I told you when I married you I wanted a big family, and now you're backing out."

David said, "It already feels like a big family."

"But I want a girl, and Bertha's more than willing."

David raised his brows.

"If I do all the preliminary work," Claudia hastened to explain, "she'll do the bottles and the dishes."

"Where do I come in?"

"You provide the love interest."

She sat back on her haunches and measured a pair of pyjamas she had bought for him at a sale. "My God," she discovered. "I shortened the same leg twice."

"I'll look sweet in those," said David, regarding the mismated result. "Why didn't you let Bertha do it?"

"I thought it'd be good practice for my soul."

"Next time please get your soul practice on your own stuff."

"It'll be all right. I still have the pieces I cut off, and Bertha can sew them back again. They're a nice colour, aren't they? Did I tell you how much I paid for them?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"I forget."

"How much do you pay when you buy your own?"

"I don't know. Four or five dollars."

"These were six ninety-five. Silk."

"They're not silk."

"They give the same impression."

"And they aren't six ninety-five," said David, firmly.

"I said, 'were.'"

"Reduced to what?"

"A dollar and a quarter. I picked them up on a table—Are you medium?"

"I always thought I was large," said David, modestly.

"They had no large. The salesman said you were medium."

"How the hell did he know?"

"I told him."

"What'd you tell him?"

"How you looked. He said you were medium—Would you mind slipping them on, so I can tell about the legs?"

"What do you think I am? In the middle of the day?"

"Suppose you were ill? You'd have to wear them all day, not just in the middle."

"I'm not ill. But I will be if you don't shut up."

"I'll get them ready and you can wear them tonight," Claudia compromised.

"That'll be something to look forward to," said David.

"Now be quiet, and let me finish the book review."

"I want another baby."

"No."

"All right for you—David, do you like Sundays?"

David dragged his eyes from the paper. "What?" he asked wearily.

"I said, do you like Sundays?"

"If I could muzzle you, they wouldn't be so bad."

"I don't like them at all. If you've ever had any grief it always comes back on a Sunday."

"You miss your mother a lot, don't you?" David asked, putting aside the paper.

She nodded.

David scowled. "Sunday's a pain in the neck," he admitted. "We might go to a movie tonight—and eat out," he added, because he knew that she loved eating out.

She was pleased about it. She told Bertha, as soon as she came in from the park with the children. "We're eating out tonight." Bertha was pleased, too, until she found that they weren't being invited as guests, but were planning to spend good money on food that could be had at home. Under those conditions, she had nothing to offer but misapproval.

"I should think you'd be glad you didn't have to do dishes for once," Claudia said.

"What are a few dishes?" Bertha scoffed.

"We're eating out," Claudia insisted, putting her foot down. Every so often one had to put one's foot down with Bertha, on general principles. "I don't know of anybody that doesn't go to her room Sunday evenings without a supper to fix."

"What would I do in my room?" Bertha queried, reasonably.

"Bertha, you're a jack. Really."

Bertha opened the oven and basted the chicken, under

which she had just relit the gas. Her Sunday dinners were a triumph of good management—preparation sandwiched skilfully between the housework and the children.

"Bertha, I'm talking to you," Claudia continued, imperiously. "I said you were a jack."

"I don't know what is a jack," said Bertha.

"Ass," Claudia elucidated.

Bertha's smile of acknowledgment was pleasant. She closed the oven, and walked to the sink, her steps unhurried, her large body informed with the pure grace of competence and purpose.

Claudia watched her. "You already do the work of six people," she scolded. "And now you want another baby in the bargain. What do you get out of it? Why don't you find a rich family with one child to take care of, and a chambermaid to do your room, and a waitress to serve you your meals?"

Bertha's broad shoulders shook with laughter. "That is funny," she said.

"Funny or not, you could land a job like that in five minutes. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Bertha said, through the tears she was about to weep over onions, "If you would like, you can feed Matthew his lunch."

"I wouldn't like," answered Claudia silently. "I wouldn't like at all." Her mind had been working in other directions—slicing bread, or cutting string beans or even setting the table. She hadn't bargained for Matthew, who had suddenly reached the stage of blowing bubbles with his spinach.

He was stretching in his crib when she entered the nursery with his hot plate. It was a first-rate stretch, with his body curved in three separate directions, and half of his face a

double chin. He took his time about unwinding himself, and bathed in relaxation, regarded his mother with languorous detachment.

"Luncheon!" she announced, assuming a falsely cheerful assurance.

Matthew pulled himself erect and bounced up and down, clinging to the side of the crib. "If he were forty, and a woman, he'd be in a fine mess," thought Claudia; for in spite of such strenuous gymnastics, his limbs bulged with fat above the line of his stockings, and small hills of flesh piled softly on each shoulder. Nor could his obesity be traced to overeating. He was completely disinterested in food, and sometimes Bertha had all but to stand on her head in order to beguile his attention while stray spoonfuls of baked potato and vegetable slid down his throat. Such antics never failed to rouse David to righteous criticism. "That child is rottenly spoiled! Let him starve until he's hungry, and he'll eat!"

"Oh, shut," Claudia would retort. "You attend to your business, and Bertha and I will attend to our business."

Now, as she approached the crib, Matthew's eyes narrowed and the way he set his lips filled her with foreboding. "Oh, such a good lunch!" she reiterated, with diminishing confidence, and prepared to lift him into his high chair. He appeared, however, to be nailed to the mattress, which made it clear that he preferred to eat where he was.

"Far be it from me to argue with you," Claudia said. "We begin hostilities here and now."

Graciously he accepted the first spoonful of chopped chicken breast, drenched with gravy, and flanked with a ruffle of puréed peas. Scarcely believing her good fortune, Claudia proffered the second spoonful. He opened his lips to receive it. "Who am I," she thought, jubilantly, "to look

a gift horse in the face?" There was no law that a baby had to eat in a high chair. Clinging to the side of the crib, Matthew probably imagined that he was standing at a soda fountain. "You get your cafeteria soul from me," Claudia concluded, alternating the peas and chicken with a spoonful of strained prunes.

Bobby drifted in. "No, no, Bobby, go away!" she protested waggishly. "You can't have Matthew's dinner!"

Bobby rewarded his mother with a cold stare. "I don't want it," he informed her, shortly.

"Co-operative, aren't you?"

Bobby said, "What?"

Claudia said, "Nothing, darling. Forget it."

She turned her attention back to Matthew. He wore a moustache of prunes on his upper lip, and continued to bounce up and down on his fat legs, without comment of any kind.

He had all but consumed his entire luncheon, when she became aware of this unwonted abstinence from speech. She became aware, too, that although the all but empty plate bore testimony of a robust appetite, the whole performance had lacked a certain validity. It had been colourless, bloodless—like the old silent movies without benefit of music, or an automobile moving along in neutral. She couldn't exactly put her finger on what was missing, but she had a distinct sense that some vital action of food consumption had been omitted. Matthew's willing, but chary acceptance of the last scraps of chicken, peas and prunes, frugally combined into a single portion, bore out her suspicions. She felt of his cheek, and found that it did not give to the touch as normal cheeks have a way of doing. She watched for some slight movement of the throat to signal the transference of the spoonful to his lower

regions—and watched in vain. The truth dawned upon her. It had been a meal without a single swallow.

Bertha tiptoed to the threshold while she was deciding what to do about it. Bertha's plump face lighted with incredulous pleasure when she saw the empty plate. She was full of loving praise for Matthew, and couldn't speak highly enough of Claudia.

"Come," she said, richly, holding out her arms. "Come Bertha will put you to sleep, mein kleine Engel."

Claudia knew a moment of exceeding conflict. She looked at the empty plate, she looked at Bertha's beaming smile. Ignominiously, she avoided Matthew's bursting cheeks. She picked up the plate and fled, leaving Bertha with her little angel.

She found Bobby and David reading the funnies together. She joined them, pretending great interest in a small man with a big stomach.

"Must you breathe down my neck?" David asked.

She twirled the front of his hair into a peak. "Don't you like me to breathe down your neck?"

Something in her tone made him look around at her. He saw at once that she'd been up to no good. "I didn't do a thing," she quickly forestalled him. "In fact, I think you're right. No more babies. Two's enough."

Bobby pricked up his ears. He was interested in babies, having just learned about white mice. There was, however, a certain fundamental question in his mind that had not yet been answered to his satisfaction. He was about to probe the matter to a logical conclusion, when Claudia said gently, "We won't talk about it for the present, darling—run and see what Bertha's doing. But don't tell her I sent you to find out."

"I don't have to run and see," said Bobby. "She's putting Matthew to sleep."

David thought the errand purely contrived. "Do as your mother tells you," he commanded, every inch the father. "I wouldn't worry about it," he assured her, as Bobby reluctantly disappeared. "Once we're back on the farm, he'll get the general hang of it."

"That's what I've been counting on," said Claudia. "What with spring and all."

After a moment or so, Bobby came hurrying back. "Matthew didn't eat any of his dinner," he reported. "But Bertha said I shouldn't tell you," he remembered tardily. "She said it would only make you feel bad if you knew."

"Let him starve!" said David, grandly.

"Yes, dear," Claudia meekly agreed.

An April shower kept the children indoors all afternoon. Matthew threw blocks from his crib, while Bertha sat at a safe distance, restoring David's pyjamas to a wearable condition. Bobby read a book, moving his lips. "Do you think he'll move his lips when he grows up?" Claudia wondered apprehensively.

"Some of my best friends move their lips," said David.

It was a good day to rest. They drifted to the bedroom. David lay down on the bed, stretching like Matthew, and Claudia softly shut the door. Sunday closed in on them, with the sound of rain tapping on the windows.

"This is nice," she sighed.

"I thought you didn't like Sundays."

"I don't. Without each other, a day like today would tear your heart to pieces."

"We have each other," David said.
They almost slept.

They stayed at home for supper. "I owe it to Bertha," said Claudia, without explaining her indebtedness. There was potato and leek soup, chicken salad, and apple fritters. Bertha knocked on wood about their appetites, considering that they'd eaten enormously at luncheon and hadn't exercised in between.

"We're just eating so as not to hurt your feelings," David told her. He glanced at his watch. "We can make the first show if we hurry," he said.

"Can I go with you?" Bobby asked, with an eternal optimism. He had never been to a movie, but he felt that it did no harm to ask.

"Not 'can,' 'may,' " Claudia automatically corrected.

Bobby looked hopeful. "*May* I go with you?" he asked breathlessly.

"No, darling, of course not."

"That was low," said David.

"It was," Claudia admitted. She put her arms around him. "Bertha will play you a game of checkers, won't you, Bertha?"

"I wash nice his hair and cut his toenails," Bertha promised.

"That will be lovely!" Claudia cried. "Say 'Thank you, dear Bertha, for being so very good to me,' "

Bobby didn't want to cry, but he certainly didn't want to laugh. He rescued what dignity remained to him by declaring, in a man's voice, "I want an apple fritter!"

"You shall have an apple fritter," Bertha said.

The rain had cleared. They took their time about shopping for a movie, and found "Up With the Sun" playing several blocks away. It had turned out to be a great picture, a picture that had set the world afire. "We're in luck," said David.

"We are indeed," said Claudia.

They smiled at each other, and kept on walking. "We're bound to find a picture that isn't great," said David.

"Pray for no travelogue, though," said Claudia.

At last they found their favourite team of comedians, appearing in a picture that was two years old. "We *are* in luck," they exulted.

"Have you got a nickel?" Claudia asked. He gave her one. She vanished into a drugstore.

When she came out, he said, "Who'd you telephone to?"

"Nobody."

He scowled. "You're going to rattle," he prophesied, glumly.

"I'll be so careful."

"That's when it's worst."

"You'll see. Nobody will hear."

"Must you eat candy at a movie?"

"Must you spoil my pleasure?"

The theatre was dark. They stumbled to their seats, and saw flashes of an historic document, with everybody dressed like pioneers. "Next week's attraction, am I glad," she breathed.

It was as good a time as any to open the chocolate bar. Her cautious spluttering of the cellophane paper sounded out like pistol shots. "Shh!" she warned herself.

"For God's sake," said David.

"They seal these darn things up so tight, you'd think I don't know what—You open it for me."

"I will not," said David.

Two women came in and took the seats in front of them. The woman who sat directly in David's line of vision wore a hat with a high crown. David wilted. "Ask her to take it off," he whispered.

"I will not," said Claudia.

It was one of the things she couldn't understand about him. Give him a woman driving a car, and at the slightest provocation, he'd bawl her off the road. But give him a woman with a hat on, and his courage deserted him, leaving him craven and defenceless.

"Let's move," he suggested, pitifully.

Claudia gave him a disgusted look, though secretly she adored this supreme illogic of his being. She leaned forward and tapped the woman's shoulder. "Would you mind removing your hat?" she murmured sweetly. "My little boy can't see."

The woman complied, but she made a fuss about it with her shoulders, and to her companion remarked on the impropriety of children going out at night.

"Mamma!" David squeaked, "I want a piece of chocolate!"

He had the audacity to eat up half the bar.

It was raining again when they stepped from the theatre. "Taxi!" David called.

It wasn't at all necessary for such a short distance, and Claudia started to tell him so.

He paid no attention to her. "All around the park," he tossed off handsomely to the driver.

"Oh," said Claudia, faintly. "What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

"I'd hate to say," said David.

"Would you have taken a hansom cab if it were there?" she asked seriously, as they drove along. "With a nice old cabby sitting up on top?"

"I'm not that bad," he defended.

She was greatly relieved. "What's the worst thing you'd rather not be?" she asked, to make sure.

"The same," David answered laconically.

"Sometimes we come near it," Claudia said, doubtfully. "Or don't you think?"

"I don't think," said David. "Whimsical people indulge in whimsey only."

"I see what you mean," said Claudia.

They drove two dollars' worth without the tip—squandering the money that Bertha had saved by preparing supper at home. "I hope she's asleep, so I won't have to face her," said Claudia, feeling guilty.

But Bertha wasn't asleep. She was standing in the hall waiting for them, with her hat and coat on, and her suitcase on the floor beside her.

For a long moment, Claudia could only stand gaping at the sight of Bertha, with her hat and coat on and her suitcase packed. She was aware of David, gaping too. And then she saw that Bertha's face was stripped of colour, and that the soft, plump contour of her cheeks had squared off into a graven mask.

"It's Lisa," Bertha said. "She killed herself." The way she said it held no rebellion, merely the sorrow that one would feel for a recalcitrant child. "She should not have done it," Bertha said. "She leaves three babies and a husband."

"Oh, Bertha!"

Claudia wanted to say more, but she couldn't. It wasn't right to give pity to a person like Bertha, she was too strong

to need it, or to want it. It seemed to Claudia at this moment that Bertha was like a great ship that had weathered many storms. She felt small and humble beside her greatness. Lisa, too, must have been small beside her mother's greatness. Poor Lisa, haunted always by the vague Trouble that denied a naming. The doctors kept calling it a nervous breakdown. But Bertha had had another way of putting it. "Lisa does not like to face life. She was always like that, from a little girl." Now, in the terseness of Bertha's wounded eyes, there was the new knowledge that Lisa did not love her mother, or her father or her husband, or her children. Lisa loved only Lisa. Bertha did not try to tell herself that it was not so. "Lisa should not have done it," she repeated. "Three little babies without a mother."

Claudia said, "They have you, Bertha." She put her arms around Bertha, and kissed her. "Don't try to come back. They need you. I can manage beautifully without you."

It was a lie. To lose Bertha was to contemplate chaos and disruption. Her courage failed her. After six years of Bertha, it was hard to stand alone—"It's time I lost her," she thought in sudden realization. "When you become too dependent on a person, it weakens you." She glanced at David. He, too, was facing chaos. Fritz, no less than Bertha, had been the bulwark of his comfort and security. Their very marriage had been blessed by the gift of Fritz and Bertha. It had been like going into a three-legged race with a head start, or an obstacle race without obstacles.

As if Bertha sensed what was going through their minds, she said, "I used a telephone call to the farm. Fritz will stay up there; there is no need for him to come down."

"Nonsense," said David. "We'll get Jim Cootz to look

after things temporarily. Fritz ought to be with you at a time like this."

Bertha's face crumpled. Her voice, which had been steady, was no longer steady. "Yah, we would like to be together," she admitted, brokenly. "Lisa was his youngest." She turned quickly and, in a moment, she was gone.

The apartment was very quiet. Claudia and David looked at each other. Claudia said, "Can something that's been part of your life for so long, end so quickly?"

"It's apt to happen that way," said David.

She slept fitfully, with the alarm clock underneath her pillow. Over and over her brain planned the day ahead of her. "Put on breakfast, see that Bobby gets off to school, feed and dress Matthew, count laundry, make beds, market, call for Bobby, prepare lunch, send Bobby to the group—thank goodness—take Matthew out, bathe children, prepare supper, wash dishes, look tidy and rested no matter what . . ."

David was tossing, too. He was probably thinking of livestock to be taken care of, fields to be ploughed, gardens to be planted . . .

She must have gone into a deep sleep toward dawn. The alarm clock wakened her. The sun was streaming through the windows. She swung out of bed. She felt like singing, of all things, but she thought of Lisa, and was ashamed.

"Hey, there!" David yanked her back. "Wait for me. I'll help you—"

"No, please, anything but that!"

"How would you like a bat in the nose?" David asked her. They began to laugh.

"I like Mondays," said Claudia.

"So do I," said David.

It was a little hard to tell Bobby that Bertha was gone—to try to explain, in words of one syllable, that it was right for them to have given her up. He couldn't see it. "Who's going to take me to school?" he demanded, a little angrily.

"I'm taking you," said David. "Any objections?"

On the contrary, he seemed very pleased about it. A lot of fathers took boys to school. Bertha's departure had its compensations.

Claudia called good-bye to them from the window, and David answered by walking bowlegged, and waving at his ears. Bobby doubled up with delight. A passer-by turned to look at them.

Claudia laughed and turned back into the living room. It was fairly tidy. She lifted the end of the rug, and, with the tip of her slipper, moved a fluff of dust into retirement. She found a paper napkin, and pushed it across the larger surfaces of tables and desk. She straightened the shades. "Voila," she said, and airily closed the door.

Matthew was waiting for his breakfast. His eyes narrowed when he saw the dish of cereal. Claudia narrowed her eyes, too. She said, and meant it from the depths of her being, "Young man, I mean business." He appeared to understand that her words were not an idle threat; that this was an ultimatum. The cereal vanished, each mouthful accompanied by its proper swallow. Triumph rose in Claudia's breast. The ogre of Matthew was no longer. Matthew was only a lamb masquerading in lion's clothes. "Pooh to you," she said aloud as she washed the breakfast dishes.

She couldn't cheat with the beds, because she had to change the sheets for the laundryman. "Tough luck," she muttered, pulling off the covers. Still, there was satisfaction in putting them freshly together again. She turned the children's mattresses, feeling pleasantly like an Amazon.

At ten o'clock she was ready to go marketing. With a sense of guilt she headed for a new and pretentious chain store on the corner of Madison Avenue. She had often gazed wistfully at the special values pasted on the windows, but Bertha didn't trust the manager, and had given her patronage to modest side shops where she could establish a wily dictatorship of weights and measures, and free bones for soup.

The manager, however, seemed to be a very nice man, and waited on Claudia personally. She lost her head a little. She bought an imported cheese, and a jar of caviare, and the most extravagant coffee. She flirted with "something absolutely new and delicious in the way of a dessert," and finally decided to try a box of it. She sampled some crackers from a bin, gave Matthew one, and ate countless peas and grapes from off the vegetable stalls.

She made friends with the butcher, too. "What beautiful salami," she flattered him. He cut off a slice and passed it to her on the flat of his knife. "Matthew and I could eke out quite an adequate lunch here every day," she thought.

On her way to call for Bobby at school, she sent Lisa flowers. She knew that Bertha would like it. Indeed, she addressed the card to Bertha. "To Bertha," she wrote, "with all the love of all the Naughtons." In her heart, she wrote another note: "Darling Bertha, I am so happy because what I told you last night wasn't a lie after all. I can really manage beautifully. P.S.—And I'm actually loving it."

By Wednesday, however, the silver and the kitchen floor had caught up with her, and she had stopped loving it. Bertha came that evening with Fritz, both of them looking like strangers in their decent mourning. "Ach, you are tired," she discerned at once, "and I cannot even stay with you until you find somebody else. That hurts me."

"But I can go back to the farm until I have trained a man to take my place," Fritz eagerly put in. "And we were thinking, Bertha and I . . ." He hesitated. Fritz hated to ask favours. But Bertha knew no pride when it came to those she loved. "Would you, maybe, want Edward, Lisa's husband?" she came out with it. "He is a nice boy. He is young—too young to have gotten married and have a family—" Her voice held sorrow without censure—"but he is a nice boy. A good boy. He would appreciate the work. He has had a hard time to get work."

"Hasn't he been a salesman for a manufacturing firm?" David asked.

"That was his great mistake," said Fritz. "Edward is a country boy from Vermont. He should have stayed with the land, only Lisa did not want that kind of life."

"She was afraid to be lonely," Bertha gently qualified. "But Edward is different. He is used to a farm. I think you would like him."

"I know we'd like him," said Claudia. "It just means we won't get a couple, we'll get separate people instead."

"I would not want to see you with a couple," said Bertha, firmly. "They are never both good. They are always out at the same time. They have thoughts only for each other. And when one leaves, it goes without saying they both leave."

"We went through exactly that experience with the last couple we had," Claudia murmured. "The man was very good, but the woman was terrible."

Bertha saw no humour in the remark—she was too deeply troubled at the thought of Claudia being alone—but Fritz's face broke into his broad smile. It was good to see him smile again.

He brought Edward to David's office the next day. David was impressed with him. "He's a nice appearing fellow," he told Claudia as he dried the dishes that evening. "Pretty shot at what's happened to him, poor devil. He went up with Fritz on the three o'clock train."

"Good," said Claudia.

"What have you done about getting a maid?"

"Elizabeth is sending Mary and Candy over tomorrow to stay with Matthew while I go to an employment agency."

"Good," David echoed.

With a farmer so promptly supplied by heaven, they imagined that fortune would continue to smile on them. They imagined that the world was full of good plain cooks with gentle hearts, who would be happy to live out in the country in a charmingly remodelled farmhouse.

"What nationality would you prefer?" Claudia asked.

"I'll leave that to you, darling," David magnanimously returned.

Mary and Candace arrived in good time the next morning. "This is service," said Claudia.

"Miss Candy's been up since before daylight," said Mary. "It's a treat for her to be takin' care of a real live baby."

Candy was one of those youngsters with a great bump of maternal instinct. She fell on her knees before Matthew's crib, and worshipped. "Oh, he's so adorable!" she cried, ecstatically.

Matthew expanded, not having enjoyed such homage since Bertha's departure. Claudia went off with the sure knowledge that he was going to be impossible to live with by the time she returned. Still, it was darling of Elizabeth

to have come to her aid in this way. Somehow the fact that Claudia had turned to her the night of Bobby's accident, seemed to have made paramount a relation to each other that had nothing to do with David. "It's really funny," Claudia thought, "how everybody's thunder has been stolen."

It was through Julia that she went to Mrs. Hoole's agency. "Of course, I've never been inside the place, I don't even know what the woman looks like," Julia confessed. "I simply call her on the telephone to tell her what I want, and she's never failed to send me very competent people."

That was all right for Julia, who, with the market up again, was back to keeping five in help, and to whom the arrival or departure of a chambermaid carried very little spiritual or economic impact. But Claudia felt that the selection of the person who was going to share her home and take care of her children, was an occasion of momentous importance. She decided, however, to use Julia's name as an introduction.

Mrs. Hoole turned out to be someone you couldn't describe. She looked like nobody and everybody, with eyes, nose and a mouth, and a faint odour of perspiration when she lifted her arms. Indeed, she cried effusively, she knew Mrs. Hartley Naughton very well—or, to be accurate, she corrected herself with a laugh, she'd been supplying Mrs. Naughton for years. She took a pencil from behind her ear, and wrote down Claudia's case history—a little like a clinic. It didn't take her long to find out that the David Naughtons were merely the poor relations of the Hartley Naughtons. Her enthusiasm waned. She implied that she was going to do her very best for Mrs. Hartley Naughton's sister-in-law, but, after all, she wasn't a magician. "Servants these days are very highly specialized," she pointed out.

"But if you'll just take a seat in the main room, I'll try to find someone for you."

Claudia took a seat in the main room, with its many windows sealed tight against the soft spring day. She observed with interest the little groups of twos sitting here and there. The employers were eager, persuasive—the maids stoney-eyed and elusive, apt to rise in the middle of a conversation, and move off, heads in air. Occasionally both parties of a twosome would rise at once. "That means they're suited," thought Claudia, enviously. She wished that somebody would come to talk to her so that she could get suited, also. It was like being a wallflower at your first dance.

At last Mrs. Hoole came toward her, accompanied by a flat-faced girl with a pleasant gait. "I've brought you Anna," she said. "Anna has very nice references, we've placed her several times."

Anna sat down. Claudia cleared her throat, and said, "How do you do, Anna."

Anna, habitué of agencies, had no time for idle chatter. She began the interview at once. Claudia found herself answering questions, fired swiftly in broken stolid English. "You live in country?"—"How much company you have?"—"You expect me cook dinner and also wait on table?"—"How many children?"—

"Look here," Claudia crisply interrupted, "I'd like to find out a few things about you, too."

Anna rose. She gave a short derisive laugh. "I like better to work for business couple," she stated briefly.

After two more interviews, Claudia's spirit was completely crushed. A third baby, indeed. "I can't even get away with two," she thought unhappily.

Mrs. Hoole was very regretful and very kind. "What you really need," she said, "is a Mother's Helper."

Hope revived in Claudia's heart. Mother's Helper. The very words had a friendly ring.

"Unfortunately," Mrs. Hoole went on, "I don't go in for that type of service, but you might try advertising in the paper. And if you don't get suited, by all means come back, and I'll do what I can to find someone for you."

"Thank you," said Claudia.

She composed and recomposed the advertisement, and read it to David when he came home. "MOTHER'S HELPER FOR YOUNG COUPLE. PLAIN COOKING. TWO CHILDREN. LIGHT LAUNDRY. CHARMING ROOM AND BATH AMID PLEASANT COUNTRY SURROUNDINGS."

"It's like poetry," he told her. "I wouldn't mind taking the job myself."

"You'll probably get it. Judging by today, I won't have a single answer."

She was wrong. The telephone bell began to ring like mad before breakfast the next morning.

"David! The ad worked, they're coming from all over!" she reported excitedly, banging on the bathroom door. "Brooklyn! Long Island! Yonkers! I feel like the Pied Piper! Hurry up! I want to have the beds made and the dishes washed up before they get here!"

The house telephone interrupted her. "There's someone here in answer to the advertisement," the hallboy announced.

"Send her up," said Claudia.

Bobby was agreeably surprised at all the bell ringing. "Are we having a party?" he wanted to know.

"A surprise party!" Claudia carolled.

He was a little taken aback because the first guest was very old and had no teeth. Claudia was a little taken aback, too. "I think she drank," she told David in a small voice.

"No think about it," David said. "You could smell it a mile off." Unlike Bobby, he was disgruntled at this disruption of his morning rites. "Get someone who can make coffee!" he threw over his shoulder, as he started for the office.

She ran after him and collared him in the hall. "Was that a dirty dig?" she demanded.

"Fairly dirty."

The elevator door slid open before she could tell him what she thought of him. A high-school girl emerged. She was plastered with lipstick, and her jaws worked busily on chewing gum. "You the party advertised for Mother's Helper?" she inquired nasally, between chews.

Claudia used her wits. "The position is filled," she said, and added pleasantly, "I've just engaged this gentleman."

The girl opened her eyes at David, and tittered rudely. Claudia smiled. "Pardon me," she murmured, "my baby's calling me." She closed the door, and left them standing there.

"That'll learn your father to tell me my coffee's bad," she said to Matthew as she stripped him of his damp pyjamas. The bell rang. She put him in his crib. She was certain it was David, come back to wring her neck. But it wasn't. Two applicants filled the doorway—a mammoth Negress, reeking of perfume, and an elderly lady, with a small, refined mouth, and blue-white hair.

"I'm sorry," Claudia stammered, with an ache of pity in her heart. "The position's filled."

"You sure get a pretty funny-looking crowd when you

advertize," the elevator boy sympathized. He saw no heartbreak in the people he carried up and down—gentility crowded out of a busy world, age that had outlived its usefulness, youth unaware of its appalling crassness.

"I feel as if I've touched tragedy," Claudia told David that evening, as, wearily, she undressed for bed.

"You're a nice girl," said David. "I like you."

"That's not very exciting. Just to like me."

He sat down beside her and pulled her to him. "Don't you believe it," he told her, huskily. "To like the person you love—that's marriage." He kissed her. "And it's exciting."

She forgot everything. She forgot how much she missed Bertha, she forgot the misery in the universe, she even forgot the greasy pots that she had left soaking in the sink.

She was "without" for almost two weeks. "This is hell," said David. Claudia was too tired to say anything. They were chained to four walls. Edith Dexter gave a farewell dinner because she and Philip were going on a long trip, but Claudia couldn't leave the children. "I simply won't ask Elizabeth to lend me Mary again," she decided. "Not that she'd mind, but after all, this is my problem, not hers—It'll be the last chance to wear my pink dress, too," she added, ruefully.

"Go without me," David urged her. "You know I hate parties."

She shook her head. "Let's stay the sort of married couple who go out together," she said.

One morning David stayed home from the office to look after Matthew, while Claudia, in sheer desperation, went back to Mrs. Hoole's agency. Mrs. Hoole was reluctant to admit defeat on account of Julia. "Help is very scarce now,

but I'm going to try to get Minnie for you," she said. "Minnie's just finished working two years on Park Avenue. But of course she won't take a position with children and light wash for less than eighty-five dollars.

Eighty-five dollars. It would knock their budget into the middle of next year. "Wait," said Claudia, "I'll phone my husband."

"Take her!" David shouted over the wire. "Pay her anything!"

Claudia read between the lines. Matthew was probably acting up. She was on pins and needles to get home. She engaged Minnie, swallowing her reservation to shoe-button eyes and a strident voice, and English that was more incorrect than broken. "Bobby'll be saying 'ain't' all over the place," Claudia thought regretfully.

Minnie arrived that same evening. She looked about the kitchen. She didn't seem to think much of it.

"We have a lovely kitchen in the country," Claudia said in swift excuse.

Minnie, however, was interested only in the here and now. "I don't see no mop," she said. "Where's the mop?"

"My last maid—" Claudia always stumbled when it came to calling Bertha a *maid*—"didn't use a mop."

Minnie was horrified. "Didn't she never clean her floor up?"

"She used a scrubbing brush," said Claudia.

Minnie snorted. "Them things. How's a girl going to use one of them things if she don't get down on her hands and knees?"

Claudia refrained from the retort obvious. "I'll buy you a mop," she acceded, remembering David's ominous demonstration of fraying nerves. "We need to get out," she thought. "I'm not crazy about leaving the children

with Minnie, but we'll go to a movie tomorrow night." It wasn't the movie that counted, it was the idea of going off by themselves.

But David didn't go to the movies the next night. He ate no supper—although Minnie's roast of lamb was passable—and Claudia, with her heart a sick lump of fear within her, hurried for the thermometer.

He made a fuss, of course. "Oh, don't be that way, it's not from the children, it's a brand-new one!" she begged him to believe. Reluctantly he opened his lips to receive it. "I'm a henpeck," he mumbled.

"Shut up. How do you expect it to register—"

He read it first, holding her off with his arm. When finally she succeeded in wresting it from him, he looked ashamed, apologetic. "Damn thing's out of order," he told her, a little foolishly.

"What's on a thermometer to get out of order, you idiot!" She stared at it. "Why, it's a hundred and two!" she whispered, aghast. Panic filled her. "Please get to bed," she entreated. "At once."

"Don't be silly. I'm perfectly all right, except for a sore throat—I've had it for a few days," he added virtuously.

"That's very smart. Brag about it, why don't you?"

She called Dr. Mack.

"Hey!" said David, gagging.

"It's your left tonsil," said Dr. Mack. "Stay in bed for a few days and take plenty of liquids."

Claudia went weak with relief. "Are you sure that's all it is?"

"Well, he's got a very nasty left tonsil," Dr. Mack repeated sepulchrally. "He ought to have those tonsils out."

"In the pig's eye," said David.

Fortunately, the next day was Sunday. "I'll stay home," he consented.

"That's big of you," said Claudia, dryly.

It was a strange, muted Sunday. At twelve o'clock his temperature had risen to a hundred and three. "Is Daddy sick?" Bobby asked in muffled tones. His world was falling to pieces. He moved like a little shadow through the rooms. Minnie didn't play with him, she didn't even notice him. "Get out of my kitchen," she adjured him, brusquely. "For pity's sake, how can I fix lunch if you're under my feet?" She was angry, because Matthew had played tricks with his food. "I saw Minnie slap Matthew," Bobby told Claudia, startled. "She slapped him twice."

At two o'clock the kitchen was deserted—the floor smeary with a hasty mopping-up, and damp dish towels hanging limply from the rack. "She's quick, anyway," thought Claudia. "I'm glad the children can get out early." She had her fingers crossed lest they come down with David's throat.

She knocked on Minnie's door. Minnie opened it on a crack. Claudia closed her nostrils against the shock of air heavy with lack of ventilation.

"What is it?" said Minnie.

"I just wanted to ask you please to stop at the druggist for some rubbing alcohol on your way home from the park."

The door opened wider, and Claudia caught a glimpse of unmade bed and littered bureau. Minnie ventured forth, fully dressed in a black checked suit, and a hat with two red feathers on it. "I ain't taking no kids out on my day off," she announced shrilly. "I always got every Thursday and every other Sunday, and I ain't changing for anybody."

Claudia recoiled from the girl's crudeness. "But this is your first Sunday here," she pointed out reasonably. "And there's sickness in the house—"

Minnie gave her strident laugh. "Well, that ain't my fault, is it? You got your rights and I got my rights—"

"You might have rights, but I don't think you have very much heart," said Claudia, quietly.

"Heart!" Minnie echoed on a crescendo of derision. "What's heart got to do with it? I do my work, don't I? What more do you expect of a girl?"

"A great deal more. Pack your clothes, and get out."

Minnie's mouth fell open. Claudia wheeled in concern. "David! Will you go back to bed!" she implored.

David swept her aside. "I'll attend to this," he said.

Minnie deflated like a bursted balloon. She looked a frightened. "I didn't say nothing about leaving." She grew canny. "But if you want to send me, the law says you got to pay me my full month's salary!"

David's blue eyes turned to steel. "You'll get paid for as long as you've been here. And you'll leave your room clean or you won't get paid at all."

"I'll call the police!" screamed Minnie.

"That's an excellent idea," said David.

Minnie gulped air. Without another word she flounced to the kitchen for a broom.

"You're wonderful!" Claudia breathed. And then he sneezed, and she remembered that he had a hundred and three. She dragged him back to bed. He baulked at climbing in. "My fever's down," he protested. "I feel fine. I want a highball and a cigarette."

For answer, she thrust the thermometer between his lips, and watched him like a hawk, alert for monkey business.

Twice he opened his mouth to show his tongue was on it. When she looked at it, she couldn't believe her eyes.

Bobby heard noises, and tiptoed to the door. Claudia swooped him in her arms. "Darling!" she cried. "Guess what! Minnie's gone, and Daddy's cured!"

Bobby's little face grew young again. He said, "I hated Minnie."

Bertha and Fritz came that evening. When Bertha heard that David had been ill, she said to Fritz, "You see. I told you so. I felt that something was wrong." She laid her capable hand against the back of David's neck, as she had so often done with Bobby and Matthew. "Open, while I look down your throat," she commanded.

Obediently, David opened.

"Say '*Ah*,'" said Bertha.

"Ninety-nine," said David, winking at Claudia.

Bertha caught the wink. "Give me a spoon, please, Mrs. Naughton."

"*Ah*," said David, quickly.

Bertha crouched before him, and peered this way and that. "A little red, maybe, on the left side. It is nothing."

Tears of relief sprang to Claudia's tired eyes. Bertha, at this moment, was like her mother. She thought, "Bertha will never really go out of our lives. Somewhere, in our pattern, she belongs for ever." She wondered if such enduring contacts were not ordained to be. She wondered why the world was full of Minnies.

There were Mollies in the world, too. Mollie had worked in the Bronx, and was good at soup. She liked Matthew, and bought him a lavender lollipop out of her own money. Claudia was touched at the gesture. "Sweet, but, my God, how dumb," she bewailed to David.

"Mollie isn't very bright," David admitted. She had boiled his best wool socks, and now Bobby was wearing them.

"My feller don't like I should go out and live in the country," Mollie confessed, at the end of the first week.

"I don't blame him at all," said Claudia. She was glad that it could all end painlessly, without anybody's feelings being hurt.

Then there was Katy. Katy didn't have a "feller," but she had girl friends. All day Katy hung on the telephone, conversing in lowered tones, shot through with bursts of intimate laughter. "Well, of all things—ain't she the scream—I'll talk it over with you when I see you Thursday —."

On Thursdays, from two to four, Katy held a salon in her room. It was always very gay. Claudia caught glimpses of silk dresses, patent-leather sandals without fronts or backs, and permanent waves designed to last for ever.

"We're leaving for the farm in a couple of weeks," she warned Katy frankly. "It's very quiet up there. Aren't you going to miss your friends?"

"Oh, no, Ma'am," Katy blithely explained. "We're all found places in Connecticut for the summer, and we're chippin' in to buy a car so's we can get around to visit—The only thing," she acknowledged doubtfully, "I wish your house was a little nearer to the beach."

She was prepared for it when Katy announced, shortly after, that she had had the good fortune to find a place directly on the water front.

"Splendid," Claudia applauded unselfishly. She mourned Katy's departure not at all. "She wouldn't have stayed after September anyway," she told David the morning after

Katy left. "We were merely a pawn in her summer plans." She poured his coffee, and placed it before him. "Smell of that," she said.

He sniffed and rolled his eyes. "After Katy's slops, it's marvellous."

"Before, after, or without Katy's slops, it's good coffee," Claudia stated, firmly.

"It is," he admitted, tasting it.

She thought this was as good a time as any to tell him her idea.

"Darling, listen," she began. "I've been thinking."

"Don't," he advised, looking worried. "Just stick to feeling. It's safer, with a mind like yours."

"This has feelings in it, too. And common sense. And logic. . . . I'm not going to bother with a maid at all."

He frowned.

"It'd be much easier, really."

"That's nonsense. It's been drudgery."

"I'll tell you why it has. Because I didn't look at it as a job. I didn't put myself in the proper frame of mind. After all, millions of women do their own housework and take care of their own children. Why should I be different?"

For a long moment, David was silent. He almost looked as if he were going to say that it was a good idea.

"It'll cut down all along the line," she went on. "You'd be surprised, the difference in the bills when I'm alone. A pound of butter lasts for ever."

David spoke at last. He said, "It's swell to know that if you ever had to, you could, and would. That's about as much as any man could ask for."

There wasn't any teasing in his eyes. It was almost as if he were making love to her. She was abashed because it was such a little thing she had offered to do; no more than her duty, actually.

"I could manage," she insisted. "Now that I've got the swing of things, it isn't hard at all."

"Maybe that's all that's necessary. Knowing how, and being willing to." He glanced at his watch. "I'm late, I have to hurry, darling." He dropped a kiss on her nose and gave her a friendly bat across the ear. "You get yourself a maid, and stop this nonsense."

There was no more love-making in him than the man in the moon at that point. Which was the trouble with David—and his charm as well. He was in and out of moods before you could turn around.

"You don't appreciate me," she sulked.

He grinned. "I work my fingers to the bone, scrubbing your floors and bearing your children, and that's all the thanks I get."

This sort of thing made her want to kill him. She pounded at him, but he only made muscle, and she got hurt. "Get yourself a maid and stop this nonsense!" she echoed furiously. "To hear you talk, you'd think all I had to do was whistle, and a paragon of perfection would appear."

"That's one thing we haven't tried," he remarked, mildly. "Whistling."

Afterwards, she racked her brains to recall the specific content of that conversation, but, like all their talks, nothing made sense for more than a minute at a time. Certainly, she hadn't whistled. But there was no getting away from it that Jane appeared, one hour after David had left the house that morning, and Claudia, who was always on the

verge of believing in miracles, felt herself tottering once again.

• The whole performance, from beginning to end, smacked of some higher inspiration; the way she'd rescued the newspaper after she'd tossed it out; the way she'd called up in answer to Jane's modest advertisement; the way Jane had come at once, even after Claudia told her that there were children, and a farm in the country, and great Dane dogs. "Almost because of it," Claudia thought, in wonder.

It hadn't taken five minutes to engage Jane. It hadn't taken Jane five minutes to decide that it was just the sort of place she wanted. "I could start in at once," she said. "As soon as I can get back to my rooming house, and pack my clothes."

"That will be perfect," Claudia breathed.

Bobby was just going to the group when she arrived, carrying two neat suitcases, and no bundles.

"Who's the lady?" he whispered.

Claudia was pleased. "The lady is Jane," she said.

David said, as he caught a glimpse of her that evening in the kitchen, "She looks like a Madonna."

"She does," Claudia agreed. Jane had sad, dark eyes, in an oval face, and soft black wings of hair startled with streaks of white. When she smiled, she became young. When her face was quiet, it told no tales—she might have been twenty, or fifty. "I think she's about thirty," Claudia said.

"Didn't you ask her?" David queried.

"I didn't ask her anything."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," said Claudia. "It didn't seem necessary. It was a sort of a miracle, her coming."

"Now, wait a minute," said David, who didn't believe in miracles. "You can't take people off the streets these days without knowing who they are, or anything about them."

"But I have the name and telephone of the woman she worked for last. The only place she ever had, in fact. She was there eight months."

"Didn't you get in touch with her?"

"I didn't see much sense in it. Look at Minnie. Minnie had references. Good ones."

"But you don't get the point," said David, darkly. "She might be a drug addict, she might be part of a racket—"

"Jane wants you," Bobby interrupted from the doorway. "I helped her shell the peas."

Claudia hurried to the kitchen. It was orderly, with the plates warming on the stove. Jane, unflurried, was mixing French dressing in a bowl.

"I hear Bobby helped. What can I do to help?" asked Claudia. "I'll feed Matthew for you," she offered generously.

"Matthew's had his supper." Jane nodded toward the empty tray. "He had two dishes of prunes," she added, a little proudly. "What I wanted to find out, do you care for garlic in your salad dressing?"

"Oh, my, yes."

"And the steak. Do you like it rare?—When I know your ways," she hastened to explain, "I won't need to be bothering you like this."

"When I know your ways." The phrase caught and sang in Claudia's heart. "David's crazy," she thought. "He doesn't know a miracle from a hole in the wall."

He admitted, however, that Jane was an excellent cook,

and that her eyes were lovely, and that, judging by the way she said '*would*, and *whilst*, there was Scotch or Irish in her, though she'd been born in America.

"Didn't you find out where her relatives were?"

"She hasn't any," said Claudia, happily. "Nor boy friends not girl friends."

"Why?" asked David.

"I don't know. It seemed so prying to ask a lot of questions that weren't any of my business."

"I wish you'd get it through your head it is your business. You've got two children to consider."

That settled it. She telephoned Jane's former employer that same evening.

"The Matson residence. Who's calling, please?"

So that was the sort of place it was. Claudia gave her name, and waited—interminably.

David looked up from his book. "Who does Mrs. Matson think she is—the Pope?"

"No, but she probably thinks I want to sell her an encyclopedia," said Claudia, fairly.

Eventually, Mrs. Matson came to the telephone, sounding like a scrawny woman in a dinner dress, who had been playing bridge.

"Who is this?" she demanded, at once curious and distrustful.

Claudia was most polite, reluctant to disturb. "If you'd be good enough to tell me something about Jane Foscett, whom you employed as housekeeper?"

The name of Jane Foscett seemed to have a peculiar effect upon Mrs. Matson. David, sitting on the other side of the

room, could hear the excited squeaking of her high-pitched voice. He put aside his book. He said, with a frown, "What the hell is biting her?"

Claudia motioned him to be quiet. She kept on listening to Mrs. Matson, whose voice grew shriller and shriller, until it sounded, oddly, like the scream of Minnie's voice. "Thank you," Claudia managed to break in. "Thank you very much. I appreciate your frankness. Naturally, under the circumstances, I wouldn't dream of keeping Jane—"

She hung up. David rose and came toward her, his face a thundercloud. "What do you mean, you wouldn't dream of keeping Jane?"

"David," said Claudia, "you were right. Mrs. Matson says Jane's a dreadful person, unfit to be in a decent home. She said she opened a letter of Jane's that came from Sing Sing, and Jane had been keeping company with a jailbird, going up to see him whenever she was off."

"Go on," said David, ominously.

Claudia bit at her lips. It was hard to go on. "The jailbird died a few weeks ago. A heart attack—that's what was in the letter. Jane asked leave to go up at once, and tried to palm him off as her husband. Mrs. Matson said she's sure he wasn't, she's sure Jane was identified with a band of crooks. The same as you said, David. . . ."

David's face got very red around the ears, and his nostrils turned waxy and wiggled, the way they always did when he was angry. "That low-down—" He gritted his teeth, and began anew. "God," he said. "A woman can be the most noble and the most ignoble creature on earth—"

Claudia knew that there was no use in arguing with him when he was in a rage like that. She felt bruised, inside, as if Mrs. Matson's shrill and ugly retaliation had been hurled

against herself. Mrs. Matson must be an unbeautiful woman, she thought, with shoe-button eyes like Minnie's, and a small and crippled soul. Perhaps, the thought occurred to her, the Minnies in the world were not entirely to blame—

"Shh . . ." she begged, trying to calm David down, because he had begun to use bad words again in a loud voice. She didn't want Jane to hear him talk like that, she didn't want Jane to know the rotten things that Mrs. Matson had said. Jane had grief in her eyes, not evil, and she wore dignity on her pale, still face. Jane had no friends, and she needed friends. She wished that she could make David understand how she felt about Jane.

He saw her looking at him. He said, furiously, as if the whole thing were Claudia's fault. "What the hell right did she have, opening the girl's letters?" He puffed his pipe. "Come on," he said, still angrily, "let's take a walk. Or, better yet, let's go to a movie."

"But Jane—How about leaving her with the children?"

He caught her roughly by the shoulders, and pulled her around to him. "Listen," he said harshly, "if I ever went to jail—no matter for what—would you stick, or wouldn't you stick?"

"I'd stick," she whispered. She was thinking, "Like a fool, I had my miracles mixed up."

The woman who had rented them the apartment thought she'd struck a miracle, too. She came on a tour of inspection before they were ready to leave, and said, conservatively, "Everything looks very nice indeed." She must have been extremely impressed however, because she wanted to know if Jane had a sister, and then she got Jane alone, and said

how would she like to earn ten dollars more a month, and spend her winters in Florida besides? Jane was too decent to say anything about it, but Bobby happened to overhear the conversation and came to Claudia in great perplexity. "Does Jane have to go to Florida?" he asked.

Claudia spoke to Jane at once. "Don't be an idiot ; if it's your chance, Jane, you go ahead."

"Jane stays right here," said Jane, and added grimly, "It takes all sorts to make a world."

She was as excited as they were about getting home. They strapped the baby carriage to the rear of the car like immigrants, and she and Bobby and Matthew piled into the back seat with luggage, and Claudia sat in the front seat next to David, with her feet on a huge box containing, among other things, a bulky iron frying pan.

David was disgusted.

"I'm devoted to that frying pan," Claudia said indignantly. "And Bertha before me was devoted to it—And you're fond of it, too, Jane, aren't you?"

Jane was fervent about it. "Oh, 'twould be a crime not to take it with us," she said.

"Are we almost there?" asked Bobby, to whom iron frying pans meant little, and distances still less.

"We only just started," Jane told him. "I expect we'll be three hours at the least."

"I can make it in two," said David, a little on the complacent side. He tooted to pass the car ahead. He came abreast of it, and the car speeded up.

"That's a woman for you!" Claudia exploded, beating him to it.

"Oh, the beautiful magnolias!" Jane suddenly exclaimed.

"Ours will be in blossom, too," said Claudia. Her heart was beginning to hammer against her ribs. "Excited?" she whispered to David, hugging his arm.

"Terribly," he whispered back.

"I remember this!" cried Bobby, growing excited too, when they crossed the bridge to the river road.

"Of course you do," said Claudia. "We're almost home."

David pointed toward a grassy slope. "That's the beginning of Elizabeth's property," he said.

"Oh," said Claudia, "I didn't realize it was so near." She thought, "I'm glad. I've missed having a woman friend, since Mamma died."

"What are you smiling at?" asked David.

"I was just thinking . . ."

"What?"

"I have a feeling that someday Elizabeth and I are going to band together to get you out of a dreadful mess."

"What kind of a mess?" asked David, interested.

"I don't know. Someday maybe you'll be old enough to think you're in love with Candy—It would be funny, wouldn't it?"

"Very funny," said David sourly.

"Just like a novel."

"An English novel," David qualified.

They passed the Cootz farm. Mrs. Cootz was standing at the gate, alone.

"That's where Joey lives," Bobby told Jane importantly. "Joey's my friend."

"We'll tell him later," David said in a low voice. He laid his hand on Claudia's for a moment. He knew what she was thinking.

"One, two, three, four of us," she counted softly, like a prayer.

"Maybe five," said David.

The house seemed to be waiting for them, sitting there, in the bend of the road.

"We're home," said Claudia.

The dogs bounded out to investigate the sound of a car stopping, and the cat darted up the magnolia tree, hanging there, and turning sideways to stare down at them.

"Shakespeare! It's us!" cried Claudia, and then the dogs knew them suddenly, and leaped up in slobbering joy.

"They're big," said Bobby, remembering anew.

Edward came, blond and sturdy, and one finger missing from his hand, like a good farmer.

"Everything's lovely," Claudia told him gratefully. "As nice as when Fritz was here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Naughton." He rested his hand on Bobby's head for an instant, and then carried their suitcases indoors.

"This is Jane," said Claudia, when he returned.

"Pleased to meet you," Edward said.

"Pleased to meet you too," said Jane. "It's a beautiful place. So peaceful." The dogs leaped up on her, but she was tall, and stood her ground.

"You're not afraid of dogs," said Edward.

"I'm not," said Jane.

He carried her suitcase inside. Claudia watched them go.

"Stop cooking up romances all over the place," David adjured her.

"No, but doesn't it make you happy to open your home to people who've known so much trouble? It gives you a sense of paying back."

"In a way, it does," said David.

"The only thing that bothers me is," she went on, in conflict, "have we lovely souls, or are we just happy to have competent help?"

David considered it. "I should say it's a little of both," he decided judiciously.

After supper they walked across the lawn, into the meadow beyond. They climbed the hill, where they could see the whole farm, cradled in trees, like a gigantic toy, with the white fence running around it.

"And even the fence doesn't make it safe, or ours," said Claudia. "It could all burn down before our very eyes, while we stand here, loving it."

"The land would stay," said David.

"But the trees? They'd be destroyed."

"They'd grow again. In time."

"You think time doesn't matter."

"It doesn't."

"I think it matters terribly. Even in these few months we've been away so much has happened—or almost happened."

"We were just tuning up," said David soberly.

She shuddered a little. "Don't say that. Please."

He tipped her face and looked down into her eyes. "Scared?"

She wanted to say, "Not scared of anything, ever as long as I have you and the children." But that was silly.

"Not very," she answered, instead.

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